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Investigation of Methods Universities Use to Inform Public Policy

Introduction

In August 1939, on the eve of World War II, Albert Einstein sent a letter to President Roosevelt alerting him to new research in physics that, for the first time, credibly pointed to the possibility of creating a nuclear weapon.[1] Einstein's warning to Roosevelt is perhaps the most famous example of an academic directly communicating research findings to a political leader in order to better inform a policy decision. Imagine if Einstein, instead, had just published a paper in an academic journal. How long might it have taken for that startling academic research by U.S. universities to reach a policymakers who could act on it? In 2016 alone, $71.8 billion was spent in the U.S. on academic research and development, with 94% of those dollars funding research in science and engineering.[2] In diverse fields such as cybersecurity, energy storage, and water safety, research findings have the potential to inform public policymakers and lead to better-informed decisions. However, too often this research stays confined to academia, never creating an impact on the outside world. Why does this gap between researchers and policymakers exist? How can universities bring these communities together?

Background

This study is based on interviews and surveys with professors and administrators at 15 major research universities, examining the most common methods used by universities to connect their research to relevant policymakers as well as the major obstacles they face when trying to close this gap. To better understand and tackle these questions, it is useful to consider academic research as falling into three distinct categories: 1) research without policy implications, 2) research intended to address a specific public policy issue, and 3) research done without an explicit policy objective which still has public policy implications. The first category, research with no policy implications, consists largely of basic research. This research is, by definition, not the focus of this study.

The second category, research designed to answer a specific public policy question, is clearly of interest to policymakers. For example, research attempting to answer questions like "Do Head Start programs lead to better outcomes for disadvantaged students?" or "Does raising the minimum wage lead to improving overall living standards in a community?" Research in this category not only has policy implications but also often has the resources and support of associated policy schools or programs that can connect it directly to policymakers. However, since this research is already effectively connected to policymakers, it is also not the focus of this study.

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[1] Einstein, Albert. "Letter to F.D. Roosevelt." 2 August 1939. FDR Library, Marist University.

[2] National Science Board. *Science and Engineering Indicators 2018*. NSB-2018-1. Alexandria, VA: National Science Foundation. 2018. Available at https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/indicators/. Accessed 3 July 2019.

The final category is the focus of this study: Research that is not designed to answer a specific public policy question but which still has policy implications. Research areas in this category could include geoscience,[3] cybersecurity, water storage, energy security, and climate change. Despite substantial and wide-ranging implications for public policy, it is here that the disconnect between academics and policymakers is greatest.

This gap is not limited to the United States but extends internationally as well. For example, at University College London, University of Cambridge, University of Sydney, and Bath University, faculty have recognized this issue and created specific programs to try to close this gap.[4] This study, however, focuses only on U.S.-based universities.

Methods of Engagement

Universities attempt to engage with policymakers using three methods: researcher-led, university-led, and third-party-led. The first method, researcher-led engagement, involves researchers directly connecting and building relationships with policymakers in order to create two-way dialogues that mutually inform each others' work. There are several ways researchers can connect directly to policymakers such as scheduling a meeting to present their findings, making a public comment on pending legislation, or sending a Letter of Support to a Congressional office or committee regarding a specific policy proposal.

For example, MIT has created the MIT Policy Lab at the Center for International Studies to provide tools, resources, and education to help encourage and enable researchers to connect directly with policymakers. The MIT Policy Lab facilitates direct contact between researchers and policymakers by identifying policy relevant research on campus at MIT, working with faculty to identify the policy implications of their work, creating and implementing outreach strategies to engage relevant policymakers and other stakeholders in dialogue, and providing coaching and communication training to help make their engagement effective.[5]

While MIT is the only school represented in the study with a center dedicated to facilitating this researcher-led approach, other schools also use this method. At Princeton, professors are encouraged to join government working groups in order to engage directly with policymakers.[6] USC supports direct outreach by using its government relations office to identify relevant policymakers and then teaching professors how to conduct their own outreach, including how to create presentations and op-eds to communicate their findings.[7] While these direct,

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[3] Jefferson, A. J., M. A. Kenney, T. M. Hill, and N. E. Selin (2018), "Universities can Lead the Way Supporting Engaged Geoscientists", *Eos, 99,* https://doi.org/10.1029/2018EO111567. 10 December 2018. Accessed 3 July 2019.

[4] Bird, Jenny. "Policy Impact Unit." University College London, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/steapp/collaborate/policy-impact-unit. Accessed 3 July 2019.

[5] MIT Policy Lab at the Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. https://policylab.mit.edu/, accessed 3 July 2019.

[6] Canes-Wrone, Brandice. Donald E. Stokes Professor of Public and International Affairs Professor of Politics, Vice Dean, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University. Telephone Interview. 25 February 2019.

[7] Sood, Neeraj. Professor and Vice Dean for Research at the USC Price School of Public Policy, University of Southern California. Telephone Interview. 29 March 2019.

researcher-led methods can be effective, they require principal investigators to possess adequate communication skills, take the initiative, and spend enough time to engage with policymakers.

The second way universities can communicate with policymakers is third-party-led. In this method, universities communicate their research findings to an intermediary, such as a think tank or advocacy organization, who, in turn, communicate them to policymakers. Generally, these entities maintain strong communication ties with policymakers and may serve as a clearinghouse for relevant academic research. By establishing close ties with these organizations, universities can take advantage of existing networks of relationships with policymakers.

This was the second most cited method in the study with roughly two-thirds of schools mentioning this approach.[8] For example, the University of Pennsylvania,[9] Princeton,[10] and the University of Southern California[11] reach out to the Brookings Institution and other similar organizations as a way to connect policy-relevant research findings with policymakers. Other schools, such as the University of Michigan, Brown University, and the University of Virginia also indicated that they use think tanks to connect policy-relevant research findings with policymakers.[12] This method allows universities to efficiently communicate a wide range of research findings but relies on working with external entities that share their goals and objectives.

The final method, university-led communication, involves schools using their own public policy schools, research centers, or Washington D.C. liaison offices as the vehicles through which research findings are communicated to policymakers. In this method of engagement, universities can repurpose academic research in ways that are digestible by policymakers, hold events that create short-term dialogues with policy audiences, and use their research centers to encourage interaction between faculty and relevant policymakers. These efforts can include hosting conferences, publishing newsletters and whitepapers, and producing podcasts summarizing research findings.

This was the most commonly cited method in the study, with nearly every school mentioning this approach.[13] For example, the Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania hosts events in Washington D.C. and Philadelphia. They organize a series of "Washington Briefs" on campus, bringing together scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to discuss how the latest research findings can inform the making of new policies.[14] Princeton leverages its office of communications and public affairs to deliver policy-relevant research to policymakers.[15] In addition to using their public policy school, Duke takes advantage of their dedicated local government and Washington D.C. liaisons to connect policymakers and

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[8] Rome, Survey.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Canes-Wrone, Interview.

[11] Sood, Interview.

[12] Rome, Survey.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Gans, John. Director of Communications and Research at Perry World House, University of Pennsylvania. Telephone Interview. 12 February 2019.

[15] Office of Public Affairs, Princeton University. https://publicaffairs.princeton.edu/, accessed 3 July 2019.

researchers.[16] At Duke's Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions, the institute works to connect environmental research with policy implications to policymakers at both the national and local level, while at Duke's Initiative for Science & Society, faculty track legislation and identify policy areas where research might be relevant.[17] Cornell hosts "meet and greet" events both on campus and in Washington D.C. with policymakers and researchers and also positions staff in Washington D.C. to connect federal policymakers with researchers at Cornell.[18] Princeton uses its centers such as the Center for Information Technology Policy and the Center for Policy Research on Energy and the Environment to help communicate research in these areas with relevant policymakers.[19] Among other activities, these centers organize seminars and talks with researchers, policymakers, and other policy audiences. While the effectiveness of these disparate methods varies, they share the advantage of being controlled and customized to meet the specific needs of the university.

Overall, the methods of communication most commonly cited by study participants were hosting events on campus with policymakers, inviting policymakers to guest lecture in courses, using social media channels to communicate research findings, and leveraging policy research centers.[20] All participants believed the effectiveness of communication with policymakers at their universities was at least satisfactory, if not strong, though they all agreed there was also substantial room for improvement.

Obstacles To Improved Communication

Despite universities deploying a wide range of efforts to connect their research to policymakers, study participants cited several obstacles that hamper progress toward improved results. The most commonly identified obstacles in the survey and interviews were a lack of incentives for researchers to inform policymakers, the unfamiliarity that many researchers have with the potential impact their research could have on public policy, and the logistical difficulties created by the distance between their campuses and Washington, D.C.

The lack of incentives for researchers to connect with policymakers was the most frequently cited obstacle to better communication, mentioned by two-thirds of participants in the survey and interviews.[21] While universities do reward principal investigators with tenure, financial incentives, promotion, and other recognition for their research (and, less frequently, teaching), they generally do not offer comparable incentives for them to create real-world impact from their research on public policy. In the absence of these incentives, many researchers may be understandably hesitant to dedicate the time necessary to attempt to inform public policy.

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[16] Pizer, Billy. Professor, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University. Telephone Interview. 5 March 2019.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Cochran, Moncrieff. Professor Emeritus in Human Development within the College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. Telephone Interview. 26 March 2019.

[19] Center for Information Technology Policy, Princeton University. https://citp.princeton.edu/, accessed 3 July 2019; Center for Policy Research on Energy and the Environment, Princeton University, https://cpree.princeton.edu/, accessed 3 July 2019.

[20] Rome, Survey.

[21] Rome, Survey.

Researchers' unfamiliarity with the whole process of policymaking was the second most commonly cited obstacle. This lack of familiarity takes two forms. First, some researchers fail to even consider whether their findings are relevant for the making of public policy. The other form of unfamiliarity is when researchers are aware that their research has policy implications, but lack the required skills and knowledge of the policymaking process or methods of outreach to take the next step of connecting it with policymakers.

Another obstacle mentioned by participants was that the distance between their researchers on campus and policymakers in Washington created a logistical challenge to facilitating interactions and conversations. The busy schedules of both policymakers and researchers make the seemingly mundane task of scheduling multiple appointments on a single trip to Washington often difficult. This physical distance can limit the in-person interactions and relationship building that can help narrow the gap between the academic and policy worlds.

Solutions

Study interviewees suggested a range of possible solutions to these obstacles. By addressing them, universities have an opportunity to facilitate a wider policy impact for their research. The issue of incentives can be approached both formally and informally. Incorporating the goal of creating an impact on public policy into decisions regarding tenure, promotion, and financial incentives, such as summer salaries or additional grant opportunities, would be one way to encourage researchers to focus more of their attention on this important task.

However, given the long-standing tradition of heavily research-focused incentive systems currently in place at most research universities, making this change might be impractical. More feasible might be to create a system of informal incentives that recognize the outstanding contributions made by researchers toward advancing and informing the creation of public policy. By creating awards for those who demonstrate a commitment to policy outreach, emphasizing real-world impact as an institutional priority, and celebrating case studies of success, university administrators can provide incentives that could encourage greater faculty participation in the policy outreach process.

To overcome the obstacle of unfamiliarity, universities can create on campus resources that identify policy relevant research, provide faculty with a basic background on the policymaking process as well as support to engage with policymakers. MIT's Policy Lab uses these methods and has found that such a program dramatically lowers barriers to entry, which encourages more researchers to engage with policymakers. In addition, the dedicated support staff and training make their outreach efforts significantly more effective.

Finally, in order to mitigate the obstacles created by physical distance, universities can work through their Washington D.C.-based liaisons. Currently, most university government affairs offices are tasked with tracking and facilitating institution level priorities, such as lobbying for federal research funding. However, some schools such as MIT, Duke, and Princeton have Washington D.C. offices that do help facilitate some amount of interactions between researchers and policymakers. Many other schools have Washington D.C. offices that could be expanded to include these types of activities, while schools that do not have a dedicated Washington D.C. liaison could add this resource to assist with connecting research to public policy. Another way to overcome the problem of physical distance could be to host more events on campus to better allow policy practitioners and researchers to communicate with each other.

Conclusion and Future Steps

Within the category of academic research that is the focus of this study -- research that is not policy directed but still has significant policy implications -- universities are making significant efforts using a wide range of both direct and indirect methods to facilitate communication between researchers and policymakers. Despite these efforts, nearly all study participants agreed that there is still room for improvement. In addition to the proposed solutions to address the obstacles described above, schools also might consider gaining a better understanding of the way peer institutions handle communications and relationships with policymakers in order to identify and adopt best demonstrated practices.

This project points to several areas that deserve further study. First, since the small number of participants in this study did not allow for the drawing of statistically significant conclusions, a larger scale study with a greater number of more diverse research institutions could yield further insights. Second, since this study focused only on U.S.-based universities, a similar examination of the approaches used and challenges faced by international universities could provide a different perspective. Finally, a key question not addressed by this study is how the different methods used to close the gap between researchers and policymakers compare in relative effectiveness and efficiency. A further study designed to answer this question could help universities determine which methods they should invest in to produce the greatest impact.

Given the large sums spent each year on academic research and the potential for improvement in how this research is connected to those who formulate public policy, this area merits further study. By better understanding how to close the gap between researchers and policymakers, universities may achieve greater real-world impact from their research efforts while enabling policymakers to make better informed decisions.

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        Ecology, Cornell University. Telephone Interview. 26 March 2019.
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Appendix
List of all schools surveyed or interviewed
Brown University
Cornell University
Duke University
Georgia Institute of Technology
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Northeastern University
Princeton University
Stanford University
Texas A&M Bush School
University of Massachusetts
University of Michigan
University of Pennsylvania

University of Pittsburgh
University of Southern California
University of Virginia