

POLICY BRIEF

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Reconnecting the “two solitudes” of academia and the policy world

Despite many similarities in their work and research, Canadian academics and government policy makers today rarely collaborate. As a number of scholars have observed, the widely-held assumption that academic research directly informs and influences policymaking is no longer the case.

Investigating ways to reconnect these “two solitudes” at a time when the public policy landscape is rapidly changing will be the focus of an important conference this fall at Queen’s University. Hosted by the university’s School of Policy Studies as part of its *Public Policy and Canada’s 150* initiative, the forum will take place November 3-4 in Robert Sutherland Hall. It is entitled, “The academy and the policy world: How can universities help respond to Canada’s complex policy challenges?”

Evolution of the “two communities” theory

The first scholars to put forward the theory of “two communities” were Caplan and Dunn. They characterized policy makers and academics as two poorly connected groups that operate under different rules, speak different languages and are motivated by different reward systems. As Caplan stated, “Government policy makers are action-oriented, practical persons concerned with obvious and immediate issues” while academics are “concerned with ‘pure’ science and esoteric issues.”¹

Several studies since have supported this approach:

- Edwards argues that researchers see governments as risk averse, too focused on the short-term, anti-intellectual and motivated by ideology, while governments see policy research as lacking relevance to current policy debates and day-to-day issues in program delivery.²
- Frenk finds that – apart from differences in perspective – differences in the way policy makers and researchers communicate also hinder the use of academic research to inform policy.³
- Jentleson and Ratner suggest that the increased role of think tanks as “research transmission belts to the policy world” is another factor contributing to the widening gap between the two communities.⁴

¹ Nathan Caplan, “The Two-Communities Theory and Knowledge Utilization,” *American Behavioural Scientist*, 22, 3 (1979): 459-470, and William Dunn, “The Two-Communities Metaphor and Models of Knowledge Use: An Exploratory Case Survey,” *Science Communications*, 1, 4 (1980): 515-536, quoted in Joshua Newman et al, “Do Policy Makers Use Academic Research? Reexamining the “Two Communities” Theory of Research Utilization,” *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 76, Issue 1 (January/February 2016): 24-25.

² Meredith Edwards, “Social Science Research and Public Policy: Narrowing the Divide,” *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 64, 1 (2005): 68.

³ Julio Frenk, “Balancing Relevance and Excellence: Organizational Responses to Link Research with Decision Making,” *Social Science and Medicine*, 35, 11 (1992): 1398. r

⁴ Bruce W. Jentleson and Ely Ratner, “Bridging the Beltway-Ivory Tower Gap,” *International Studies Review*, 13 (2011): 7.

Policy makers acknowledge lack of research uptake

In a survey of officials in the Canadian federal and provincial governments, Landry et al found the adoption and influence of research on policy was low. Only eight per cent reported that the research received “usually influenced decisions” with fewer than one per cent indicating that research “always influenced decisions.”⁵ University research was used most in the areas of education, IT, social services, health and social security. It was used least in municipal and regional affairs, public works and public infrastructure.

In a study of Canadian health agency managers, Belkhodja et al found that respondents acknowledged receiving academic research, but a significant number reported that “research never or rarely influenced their decisions” or “was never or rarely transformed into concrete applications.”⁶ These results are in line with the findings of comparable international studies.

Bridging the gap between academics and practitioners

How must the academy change to make its knowledge and expertise more accessible to policy makers? Avey and Desch argue that the most important contributions academics can make are not as direct policy participants but rather as informal advisors or creators of new knowledge,⁷ while Zambardini encourages “self-education of practitioners” rather than speaking truth to power or disciplining power with truth.⁸

According to Brian Head, academics who want to influence policymaking must understand the “situational needs of practitioners, communicate research findings in plain language” and that their research is only one form of relevant evidence for decision makers.⁹ As Head concludes, the challenge will be to “institutionalize” better practices and incentives to bridge and overcome gaps between governments and other sectors.¹⁰

Mitton et al identify eight methods to bridge these gaps: 1) face-to-face exchange between decision makers and researchers; 2) education sessions for decision makers; 3) networks and communities of practice; 4) facilitated meetings between decision makers and researchers;

⁵ Rejean Landry et al, “The Extent and Determinants of the Utilization of University Research in Government Agencies,” *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (March/April 2003): 197-198.

⁶ Omar Belkhodja et al, “The Extent and Organizational Determinants of Research Utilization in Canadian Health Services Organizations,” *Science Communication*, 28, 3 (2007): 405. See also, Michael Howlett and Joshua Newman, “Policy Analysis and Policy Work in Federal Systems: Policy Advice and Its Contribution to Evidence-Based Policy-Making in Multi-Level Governance Systems,” *Policy and Society*, 29, 2 (2010): 123-136.

⁷ Paul C. Avey and Michael C. Desch, “What Do Policymakers Want From Us? Results of a Survey of Current and Former Senior National Security Decision Makers,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 58 (2014): 228.

⁸ Lorenzo Zambardini, “Politics is Too Important to be Left to Political Scientists: A Critique of the Theory-Policy Nexus in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 22, 1 (2016): 15.

⁹ Brian Head, “Relationship between Policy Academics and Public Servants: Learning at a Distance?” *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (2015): 6-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

5) workshops; 6) capacity building; 7) web-based information and electronic communications; and 8) steering committees.¹¹

Finding new ways to solve complex policy problems

While acknowledging they use academic research infrequently, today's policy makers have also expressed concern about the situation, and a desire for change. In 2010 a Canadian Public Service Advisory Committee report noted that a public service "operating in isolation runs the risk of becoming irrelevant."

The report suggested that policymaking be enhanced and shaped by additional perspectives,¹² and encouraged the continued involvement of external advisors and universities in the policy development process.¹³ In 2012 the Advisory Committee reiterated this message when it recommended investing in and encouraging relationships with "policy centres" outside of government.¹⁴

At November's forum, distinguished speakers from across the public policy spectrum will examine three current Canadian policy issues in light of the successes and failures of government/academy collaboration. Forum participants will be encouraged to discuss lessons learned and to develop potential strategies for addressing acute and longer-term policy problems together.

¹¹ C. Mitton et al, "Knowledge Transfer and Exchange: Review and Synthesis of the Literature," *Milbank Quarterly*, 85, 4 (2007): 729-768. See also, John N. Lavis et al, "How Can Research Organizations More Effectively Transfer Research Knowledge to Decision Makers?" *Milbank Quarterly*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (2003): 221-248.

¹² Canada, Prime Minister's Advisory Committee on the Public Service, *A Relevant and Connected Public Service*, Fourth Report to the Prime Minister, (Ottawa: Privy Council Office, March 2010), 9, 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴ Canada, Prime Minister's Advisory Committee on the Public Service, *Moving Ahead: Public Service Renewal in a Time of Change*, Sixth Report to the Prime Minister, (Ottawa: Privy Council Office, March 2012), 6.