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.”

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.
- 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.
- 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.

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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? Avery 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;

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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.
10 Ibid., 10.
5) workshops; 6) capacity building; 7) web-based information and electronic communications; and 8) steering committees.\footnote{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,\footnote{12} and encouraged the continued involvement of external advisors and universities in the policy development process.\footnote{13} In 2012 the Advisory Committee reiterated this message when it recommended investing in and encouraging relationships with “policy centres” outside of government.\footnote{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.

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\footnote{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.

\footnote{13} Ibid., 10.