

Political Science Training and Policy Research in Public Settings*

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The majority of political scientists would probably consider a career as an applied public policy researcher only if academic disaster loomed or extraordinary disillusion gnawed. Nevertheless, most recent graduates of doctoral programs in political science have the skills needed for these positions. The question for individual political scientists is whether they would thrive, or whether their sanity (and the sanity of all about them) would be seriously impaired by such a career choice.

Given the differences between the acknowledged subfields of the discipline, as well as the wide range of policy research positions that exist in the public sector, I assume that the political scientists most likely to consider public policy research will have concentrated on American politics, public administration, or public policy. I also assume they will have had advanced training in quantitative methods and basic political theory. Recent data on placement suggests that this group represents about half of the newly minted Ph.D.s (Mann 1989).

Policy researchers are hired by the executive and legislative branches of federal, state, or local governments. The nature of the research varies tremendously. In some instances, research in public agencies primarily consists of generating descriptive data about particular programs. In other instances, a variety of data and methods are used to help determine the most appropriate policies in particular issue areas. For the purposes of this paper, the similarities between these types of public policy research are probably more important than the differences vis-à-vis academe or teaching, and private sector research.

Requirements for a Career in Applied Policy Research

The skills critical to applied policy research are: (1) the tools of applied

research, i.e., the methodological and technical skills required for design and analysis; (2) substantive knowledge of the subject area and issues being researched or the ability to absorb knowledge of new fields at a rapid rate; and (3) the ability to function in a policy making environment, i.e., the interpersonal skills needed to interact effectively. Occasionally, individuals have succeeded without the first and second sets of skills; such individuals were abundantly blessed with the third set of skills. Without appropriate interpersonal skills, however, the applied policy researcher may not only be ineffective, but may also have a thoroughly miserable experience.

Tools of Applied Research

Applied research requires appropriate methodological and technical skills. While most textbooks on public policy advocate using multiple methods of analysis (e.g., Dunn 1981), the greatest demand in the public sector is probably for quantitative research. It is very unlikely that a political scientist who is hired by a public agency will lack the requisite skills, given the increasingly sophisticated methodological training the discipline provides. However, the policy researcher with a Ph.D. may be frustrated by the relatively basic nature of many of the analyses demanded by public administrators and policy makers. Oftentimes, policy makers' most pressing need is to discover what is occurring in a particular program or a certain situation. In such cases, basic descriptive statistics are usually called for. It is much rarer for policy makers to initiate research that seeks to verify particular theories using inferential techniques.

Most public policy makers have not spent years acquiring rigorous methodological skills. Many recent hires hold MPAs; this means they

will have taken introductory statistics courses. While this can make them very receptive to more sophisticated analytic techniques, one should proceed with caution. More than one policy researcher has finished a sophisticated presentation to discover that the audience believed that an ordinary least squares regression coefficient could be interpreted as a Pearson's r . Public servants who have risen to the level of commissioners and directors have most likely not been trained in—or needed to worry about—the finer points of methodology. Their concern is for findings critical to the policy process that they can communicate to elected public officials and their staffs—many of whom were trained as lawyers.

In a large agency employing Ph.D. researchers from a variety of disciplines, the most rigorous analyses will likely be entrusted to economists, statisticians, or operations research (OR) specialists. This is another potential frustration. It is not generally recognized that many political scientists are accomplished econometricians, and that some are skilled in mathematical modelling. The broad range of methodological skills political scientists can possess does not generally appear to be appreciated. Even a bad economist, statistician, or OR specialist is likely to be a more prized commodity than a good political scientist. They will probably receive higher salaries than political scientists. Despite some political scientists' allegations of economists and statisticians occasionally confusing correlation and causality, the unfortunate truth is that economics and statistics have a cachet that political science does not.

Consequently, many political scientists in applied research settings find themselves generating scores of frequency tables, crosstabulations or trend graphs—and very little else. They may be eager to apply a new

method they have just discovered in their professional literature, but may find few opportunities to do so.

In many instances, the greatest service an applied public researcher can perform is to develop basic but solid research designs. Public administrators and policy makers know what questions they want answered: those which could have the greatest impact on the policy debate. Consequently, they can demand sweeping analyses intended to demonstrate a succession of causes and effects. In the process, they may overlook potential problems and limitations inherent in the research design. The value of a training in research design, coupled with the ability to explain methodological shortcomings and alternatives to policy makers should never be undervalued. Political scientists ought to be able to meet this need, as their training should have stressed the need to win acceptance for proposals and projections.

Substantive Knowledge of the Particular Subject Areas

Political science provides its students with an understanding of American politics, public policy, and public administration. Political scientists should be trained to see overarching issues and concerns and to place their research efforts within broader frameworks. In addition, the ability to see the moral and philosophical implications of particular actions should have been developed through some training in political theory.

In the long run all of this could be useful. In the short run—unless one is a high-level policy advisor—it is necessary to tread carefully. Understanding the policy process allows one to realize one's own modest place as a policy researcher within it: to provide information that policy makers can use to achieve desired goals. In general, policy researchers have not been hired to make policy; they have been hired to provide information. They are not "pure" researchers now (if indeed they ever were). Although one's superiors may be interested in the deeper moral implication of a piece of research, they are most interested in seeing their orders implemented and their

goals met. Prolonged, intense debate is not always advised. Bureaucrats notice one's position in the overall hierarchy, not one's fine academic credentials.

Political scientists may be employed by an agency whose specific issues or subject matter they are not familiar with. Sometimes, their dissertations will have examined the particular policy areas they are employed to research. More usually, they will have had only casual contact with the agency's issues through a variety of graduate courses. Nevertheless, the political scientist will not be disadvantaged when compared to other social scientists. Most academic disciplines consider policy areas from highly theoretical points of view; few academic disciplines consider the "nuts and bolts" of administering and implementing programs. Upon arriving in a public agency, the researcher must begin to understand that agency in terms of how programs are administered and how data are collected. Very little is obvious; most is governed by the agency's history; and much is grey and difficult to define. Generalists, who enjoy new subject areas, meeting people from a wide variety of academic and nonacademic backgrounds, and rapidly mastering large amounts of new material will probably be best suited to these environments.

Political scientists usually receive a broad training that exposes them to the methods of a number of disciplines. And more than once in a career, the political scientist has had to master the details of an arcane issue area. If all else fails, political scientists can at least treat the agency itself as the subject for inquiry, considering how bureaucratic theory applies to the current situation.

Ability to Interact Effectively

Finally, what is it about training in political science that could be useful to an individual researcher facing the trials and tribulations of public policy research settings? While this paper will not argue for the approaches of one of the earlier theorists, Niccolò Machiavelli, it will contend that a knowledge of effective argument and positioning (along the lines of Riker's "herasthetics," for

example) is appropriate. The breadth of political science is also a factor in its favor. Political scientists have probably received some training in comparative politics. They have also confronted a variety of ideologies and paradigms during the course of their studies. As Ph.D.s of many disciplines converge in applied settings, a training which has exposed the political scientist to many approaches and types of problems can be a distinct advantage.

Most interpersonal skills are innate, although honed through experience. Certain skills can never be learnt by certain personalities. Nevertheless, particular individuals can recognize whether they will be suited to public policy research. The best way to conceive of things may be as a type of game: a situation with rules and incentives that has to be played a certain way. The political scientist who cannot accept even a hint of methodological impurity should not be in the public sector. The political scientist who cannot relinquish theory-based research for issue-based research should not be in the public sector. On the other hand, the political scientist who enjoys interpersonal contact, interchange and discussion with those from a wide range of disciplines could consider this option. The political scientists who best succeed in applied research settings move to occupy a role between the "purer" researchers and the policy makers, learning the language of both and the difficult art of translation.

Doctoral Studies and Technical Positions

Even with the requisite technical skills, the doctoral product of a political science program will ponder long and hard before embarking upon a research career in the public sector. A bureaucratic setting is far removed from academe. The delivery of government services does not always occur in a strictly rational fashion. A political scientist who has been inculcated in a deliberate, methodical approach to public affairs can be startled by this. Many other shocks are also in store.

Becoming accustomed to supervisors can be a major cultural shock. Outside of academe, supervisors do far more than control one's dissertation. They sign timesheets, permit one to take leave, give assignments and create deadlines, rate one's performance, and require work to be performed in the agency's office. Even the best scholars do not expect to be treated as equals.

The treatment and role of "technical staff" by policy makers, and indeed agencies as a whole, can be humbling. A political scientist hired to a research position will soon realize that technical staff have little say over policy making or even analysis. Their role is supportive. The policy makers—the divisional heads and elected officials et al.—determine what studies are required, how their results are to be interpreted, and what actions can be taken. Ideally, the political scientist would be hired as a policy advisor with access at the highest levels. Most opportunities for employment, however, are at much lower levels. Nevertheless, it is always possible to advance, and the best way to do that is probably by becoming a bureaucratic player who is recognized as having technical skills. Many individuals initially hired in technical positions have gone "on line" and succeeded admirably. Otherwise, career development will take place within a technical group.

There is great variation in the way research units are organized and treated within different agencies. In some, the research unit is seen as the "R&D" shop, with top management consistently interested, as they believe that the research will support their own policy positions. A few agencies—such as the General Accounting Office or the Bureau of the Census—do nothing but forms of research or investigation. In most agencies, research is a small part of a very big picture. Then there are differences between research conducted for the executive or the legislative branches. Finally, there are differences between the levels of government, with city and state agencies having much narrower foci than federal agencies.

All of these have positive and negative consequences. When management is interested in ongoing

research, the research unit can be under a great deal of pressure to produce results. On occasions, they will be under pressure to produce results that support agency policies. In any case, there will be more pressure to behave according to agency norms and standards.

Some smaller research units in large agencies, on the other hand, can be left very much to themselves and their own esoteric thoughts. They are required to churn out appropriate statistics at various intervals, but still have a lot of downtime for their own research agendas. My favorite study produced on govern-

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ment time was entitled "Deceased Loved Ones in the Dreams of the Mentally Retarded." Such research units can also be a lot less concerned with the bureaucratic norms followed by ordinary line units in their agency. Researchers directly employed by legislative committees will likely work in smaller groups than those who work for executive agencies. The hours and approach to work may be very different from their colleagues in much larger bureaucracies, but the pressures can be more intense.

Differences between levels of government are also important. A political scientist can be a bigger fish in the smaller pools of city and state government. While this can lead to greater prestige and the most interesting assignments, it can also mean working without kindred spirits.

Finally, what are the joys of applied public policy research? In academic settings, the minds of political scientists can merrily romp about as they contemplate problems that

have troubled humanity since the dawn of truly cognitive activity. They seek to improve the Polity. In the process, they can evaluate all of the presidents since Washington, predict the outcomes of future elections, propose constitutions for new democracies, and even offer proposals to eliminate War and guarantee Peace. In public research settings, it may seem that they are fated never again to enjoy such grandiose cerebral pleasures. Applied research generally asks different questions, such as: what changes have there been in the number of recipients of a particular welfare program over a five-year period? What variation in expenditures can be noted between the counties of a state for a mandated service? What factors lead individuals with disabilities to be placed in particular residential settings?

Some of the rewards for answering questions like these are basic; others are more profound. On a basic level, the pay is usually higher in public policy settings than in academe. More importantly, one can be involved in projects that collect far more primary data than would ever be possible with a normal research grant. Furthermore, one is working on issues that are current and vital, frequently with data that few others have access to, and the outcome of one's research may directly impact the policy process. Every now and then, one will make a discovery that will influence a policy debate, and the lives of many people. Personally, one will at most share a sliver of the credit. Therefore, the thrill of a concrete discovery (even via a frequency table or crosstabulation) which will impact a debate and lead to action of some kind is the sort of reward the applied researcher should enjoy. That, in the short run, is probably what should attract and keep political scientists in applied research settings.

In the long run, the development of large databases in most fields of study, and the increasing use of more advanced quantitative and qualitative techniques, should convince the applied public policy researcher that future projects will be ever more challenging and rewarding. The main motivation, however, should be the belief that applied policy research is

necessary to the policy process, and that it is worth living with some contemporary tribulations in order to advance that goal.

Note

*The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and should not be construed as representing those of the U.S. General Accounting Office.

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Giving Businesses What They Need*

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It is time for a preliminary look at how political science, both in its teaching and research components, can contribute to meeting the needs of the business community. The business sector has generally been bypassed, or even ignored, by many political scientists whose applied connection tends to focus on the governmental sector. This is quite understandable for the links forged between political science and government are obvious. Not so obvious, but nevertheless of growing importance, is the link between the business community, academic business schools, and the discipline of political science.

The strengthening of this link will become more feasible as the global economic arena becomes the norm in which business is conducted in a manner in which understanding of foreign political situations is critical. If this assumption is valid, we will expect to see increased demand for political scientists, especially those whose subspecialties are international relations and/or area studies.

Another fertile subset of political science that can prove useful to business is policy science. Since policy science frequently crosses multidisciplinary lines in its analysis of programs and policies, it is one subspecialty that should have an easier time forging new links to business. Bobrow aptly notes that policy issues do not "respect entrenched disciplinary boundaries that

owe their existence . . . to the rigidities of academic institutions" (Bobrow 1987, 6). For this reason, policy analysts do not need to be convinced to venture outside of their discipline as might be the case for the political theorist. We are also reminded that policy analysts are often called upon to practice the art of persuasion as they present their analyses to those in government (Majone 1989, 9). This skill is certainly useful to successful interaction with a business community that frequently uses persuasive techniques to its advantage. Finally, policy analysts are particularly well suited to serve business because they are already "sensitive to the . . . realities with which politicians and administrators must live and work" (Hofferbert 1990, 19). Replace the words "politicians and administrators" with business people and managers, and we have a good fit between the policy analyst and business. In short, the policy analyst is accustomed to rubbing shoulders with those outside of his discipline in matters of research.

Meeting this nascent demand, however, does not mean that the business community will be banging on our office doors. This is because the business community views its needs in an applied manner and generally perceives academics as unable to produce results that can be rapidly absorbed by their personnel and managers. In short, what we produce

in the form of research is regarded as not relevant to their needs. This is unfortunate, for many political scientists do have years of accumulated knowledge that, if channeled in an applied manner, can be of enormous practical use to the business community.

Improving Relationships

The key to improving the relationship between political science and business is twofold. First, political scientists must accept that an applied relationship between our discipline and business is desirable and to be encouraged just as it is with government. Secondly, political scientists must be flexible enough to research topics of interest to business and to compile results easily consumed by that sector.

The latter is not an easy task, for academics tend to focus on theory and explanation because that is the generally accepted scholarly measurement by which to assess a political scientist's work. Yet, business is also looking for prescription, prediction, and forecasting, something which academics often avoid.

Lastly, let us not overlook the obvious fact that business is often construed in a negative manner by many political scientists. In his research, Vogel points out that "relatively few political scientists study business at all" as it pertains to poli-