

Is There Really a Scholar-Practitioner Gap? An Institutional Analysis

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The relationship between scholars and practitioners is a continuing source of concern to both communities.¹ Each side complains about the insularity of the other and routinely points to gaps that separate them. Alexander George and other scholars found weak interest and lackluster capacity on the part of academy-based social scientists to contribute knowledge deemed useful to the policy community (George 1993; Nincic and Lepgold 2000). For their part, leading policy practitioners have bitterly complained about what they see as the growing irrelevance of scholarly work to the design and conduct of statecraft (Newsom 1995–1996).

In this essay, I take a different tack. I argue that despite deep and long-standing concerns about the putative scholar-practitioner “gap,” the situation is not nearly as dire as many have claimed. In some respects, the situation has actually improved, as reflected in the vast range of new knowledge available and the new channels through which it can be obtained. The flaw in most arguments is that observers misunderstand the recent evolution of the institutions that supply, and use, scholarly analysis, as they have become more differentiated. As traditional disciplinary departments (especially political science and economics) have stepped back from past public engagement, other institutions have been more than willing to take their place: witness the steady growth of think tanks, schools of public policy, and professional organizations willing to supply, in the words of the president of the Social Science Research Council, “necessary knowledge” (Calhoun 2004).

But if the overall situation is reasonably well-balanced between the need for and supply of analysis for action, the discipline of political science has drifted

away from relevance, engagement, and impact, and shows few signs of changing course. In this essay, I describe and account for institutional differentiation in these communities of practice, and point to some of their positive and negative implications for the political science profession, and for public affairs. While these issues have been debated across the board, I concentrate on the discourse as it unfolds in the foreign affairs community, with which I am most familiar, having worked as analyst and practitioner across several institutions including the White House National Security Council, as a fellow in foreign policy think tanks, and as a teacher and author on international affairs. The debates in this domain have been especially robust, and the intense pressures of globalization provide a particularly clear window into the urgency and importance of current trends in knowledge-action relations.

Beyond increased institutional differentiation among the *suppliers* of knowledge, several other shifts are relevant here. The *demand* for policy-relevant analysis of foreign affairs has also become more institutionally varied, with many more government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and corporations seeking new knowledge. Also, recent shifts in the theory and methods of the discipline reinforce these trends. Finally, the *substance* of modern policy problems has itself become more multifaceted. Under the accelerating pressures of globalization and the information revolution, policy-makers confront a more complex, fast-changing, and confusing array of substantive issues from terrorism and weapons of mass destruction to environmental degradation, and seek assistance wherever they can.

In a short essay like this I must set aside some issues I recognize as critical, such as the importance of undergraduate education and citizenship training. I turn to some of these concerns in the Conclusion.

A few quick definitions. “Practitioner” covers a variety of professional roles and activities, and while I focus mostly on those inside government foreign affairs agencies, “practitioners” also operate in non-profit organizations and the private

sector. As busy decision-makers, they rely on the studies, reports, and other raw material provided by analysts. Of course, the line between analyst and activist practitioner is not always sharp (Wilson 2000). Still, it makes sense to draw a distinction between them and “scholars,” i.e., those appointed to traditional departments of political science (or economics or sociology); faculty of public policy schools, or specialized research or teaching institutes on university campuses. Of course, individual scholars vary considerably in their commitment to particular theoretical and methodological approaches, balancing quantitative and qualitative work, or normative or empirical theory, or generalist or specialist orientation.² These choices may affect their commitment to social action and practice. But their principal institutional responsibility is to reflect and analyze, not to act. Within the scholarly community, however, I want to distinguish further between public affairs schools and mainline departments, whose incentive structures now differ significantly and whose professional cultures demonstrate internal regularities. It is now possible to speak of two very different orientations to the value of policy engagement.³ Finally, there is also a growing universe of think tanks and trade associations where scholars and analysts are active.

What importance has this topic beyond mere professional curiosity? At a time when America and other nations are shifting toward more knowledge-intensive societies, where the success and sustainability of non-profits, firms, universities, and government agencies hinge increasingly on their capacities to obtain, manage, and employ “necessary knowledge,” scholar-practitioner relations loom large as critical social linkages whether in education, bio-technology, information technology, or other substantive fields. In this context, it matters a lot how decision-makers in government, private firms, and non-profits gain access to the information and knowledge they need, when they need it, in the form they require. With the need for and supply of new knowledge increasingly driven by global dynamics, it also makes sense to trace scholar-practitioner relations in international affairs.

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Principal Academic Concerns

While some academics argue for greater engagement between the academy and the “outside world,” the core of the social sciences still remains largely uninterested in policy work (Fenno 1986; Holden 2000). In his thought-provoking American Political Science Association (APSA) Presidential Address, Theodore Lowi (1992, 387) went so far as to warn that greater affinity between the state and political science, between academics and public policy practitioners, leads to a “technocratization” of knowledge, where the purpose of research is to “predict in order to control.” Along the same skeptical lines, Weaver (1989) argues that organizations such as the Heritage Foundation and Ralph Nader’s non-profits blur the line between research and advocacy. Often these organizations are funded by businesses and other private interests seeking public influence. This kind of involvement is viewed as highly problematic from the perspective of the academy, which prizes its independence. The risk is that think tanks become advocates for the interests that pay them.

George, Weaver, and Holden have each separately explained the disjuncture in terms of the very different professional incentives that distinguish the scholarly from the practitioner communities, a theme Jentleson (2002) takes up as well. Neither the enforced rigors of the tenure system nor the pressures of scholarly academic publishing today encourages serious attention to policy issues in the academy. Scholars are rewarded by their peers for abstract technical writing aimed at limited audiences of other scholars, and punished for seeking too much breadth, especially early in their careers. Weaver (1989) argues that academics are trained to examine the “why” and “how” of things, and not the “what should be done?”

But in his deliberately provocative 2002 APSA Presidential Address, Robert Putnam (2003) warned his fellow scholars that they risked growing irrelevancy and professional marginalization if they fail to repair the breach that has grown between the discipline of political science and the concerns of the American public and policy-makers: “We have become the profession of three nos: no problem, no solution, no reform.” Political science, he claims, has become too self-regarding and insufficiently driven by broader contemporary issues of public interest. Putnam contends that rigor and relevance are not antithetical, but should be mutually reinforcing. He especially criticizes (250) the trend of focusing mainly on methods not problems, as well

as the failure of academics to engage more directly with their fellow citizens, to listen to, rather than lecturing at them: “[a]ttending to the concerns of our fellow citizens [and not just “policy-makers”] is not just an optional add-on . . . but an obligation as fundamental as our pursuit of scientific truth.” Furthermore, Putnam (251) reminded his audience: “better an approximate answer to an important question than an exact answer to a trivial question.”

The president of the most prestigious social science organization in the country voiced precisely the same concerns. Craig Calhoun, head of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), calls for a more public social science, more committed to producing what he calls “necessary knowledge.” Calhoun (2004) agrees fundamentally with Putnam, insisting that a more engaged “public social science does not equal applied social science,” and that opposing applied to pure research is part of the problem. Like Putnam, he believes that “problem choice is fundamental.” Too many academic projects “are driven neither by deep intellectual curiosity nor pressing public agendas, but simply the internal arguments of academic sub-fields or theoretically aimless attempts at cumulative knowledge that mostly accumulate lines on CVs. . . . To let these displace the attention of researchers from major public issues is to act with contempt towards the public that pays the bills” (13).

Curiously perhaps, the broadsides for improved scholarly-practical interaction rarely engender a sustained two-way debate. There is point but no counterpoint; outside critics but few inside defenders. This reflects the universal reality that prevailing arrangements rarely need as much energetic defense, precisely because they are hegemonic, while the critics are passionate and active. Still, this dismissive lack of engagement is quite telling, as the “science-for-science’s sake” scholars easily ignore their colleagues’ occasional clarion calls for greater relevance.

While the deepest worries about university-policy fault lines seem to be most clearly articulated by senior scholars rooted in the disciplines, some practitioners do point to the gap and its societal costs. In a much-cited essay in *Foreign Policy*, former Ambassador David Newsom (1995–1996) excoriated the social science community for its disinterest and growing irrelevance, claiming it was a retreat into ever more abstruse and academic models with very little relevance beyond the ivory towers. Wrote the former ambassador, “Much of the process of modern scholarship seems

incestuous. Academicians often appear caught up in an elite culture in which labels, categories, and even the humor have meaning for ‘members only.’ Their writings are filled with references to other scholars’ writing; they speak to each other rather than to a wider public” (62). The former head of the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA) pointed to the same trend, but applauded the path taken by policy schools to address these national needs. Herself a former senior international affairs official, Dean Susan Carroll Schwab (2003) wrote in praise of a public policy/international affairs education, pointing to its interdisciplinary orientation and concern for context, as well as to the schools’ “embrace of scholar-practitioners, individuals with strongly scholarly credentials who have demonstrated strengths as practitioners who periodically move into government” (2). In his own Presidential Address, Matthew Holden (2000) makes similar claims about the need for greater engagement.

Scholars point to two main factors leading political science into a more insular, inward-looking mode. One is the current fascination in the social science disciplines with formal modeling, to the detriment of analyzing and explaining real-world countries and communities (Lepgold 2000). The second trend is the popularity of quantification, which can push scholars to pose questions whose answers can be measured using available quantitative indicators, rather than ask other questions whose answers cannot readily be reduced to numerical terms, though they may be more intrinsically interesting.

An Institutional Approach to the Supply and Demand of Analysis

While these explanations are accurate and valuable, they capture only part of a very complicated picture. A more satisfactory explanation requires that we turn to the evolving institutional landscape of scholar-practitioner relations, and link these institutional changes to the incentives that shape where, how, and for whom analysts actually do their work.

New Institutional Patterns in the Supply of Policy-Relevant Analysis

Over the past several decades the institutional sources of social science writing on public policy have become much more differentiated. No longer are the political science departments at leading

universities the dominant source of ideas, analyses, and commentaries for policy-makers. The departments of government at Harvard and political science at Yale still command respect and interest in Washington, but today they jostle in a crowded field of purveyors of policy analysis, which includes: (a) think tanks; (b) a rising tide of schools of public policy and international affairs; (c) non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and (d) private sector trade associations.

In 1994, the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA) had only 15 members and two affiliates. Today, APSIA has 28 members (19 U.S.-based and nine international) and 15 affiliate institutions. The changes have not only been quantitative; they have been qualitative as well, as the schools have developed a shared ethos of service, a distinct system of rewards for professional activities, as well as growing professional networks linked to policy analysts (often their former students) in government and in the private and non-profit sectors. The result is a well-established *profession* of public policy analysis with its own incentives, complete with robust professional associations and journals that lie outside and compete with the traditional disciplines for readers and authors, and whose schools also compete for good students and faculty. Along with the proliferation of separate institutions there has been a proliferation of policy journals providing outlets for the new kind of writing and thinking: publications from international affairs schools such as the Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies, Georgetown, and Fletcher. As a consequence of these separate but reinforcing changes, policy-makers need not look to core university departments of political science or international affairs as their main source of ideas and analysis. (Jentleson [2002] makes the related converse argument, pointing to the small numbers of policy-relevant articles—on terrorism, for example—in the core disciplinary journals.)

There have been similar increases in the number and range of think tanks which produce knowledge on international affairs. Highly visible institutions like the Council on Foreign Relations and the Brookings Institution have been joined by other general purpose think tanks like the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, as well as those that concentrate on only one or two international topics—the Council on Competitiveness or the Institute for Peace, for example—or a single region (for example TransAfrica or the Middle East Institute). Furthermore, pri-

vate sector trade associations like the AEA (formerly the American Electronics Association) or the U.S.-China Business Council produce rigorous report after report for their own members and for members of Congress and other policy-makers.

The Changing Demand for Policy-Relevant Analysis

Increasing institutional differentiation on the supply side is matched by similar differentiation on the demand side. No longer is attention to international and security affairs monopolized by the traditional foreign affairs departments like State and Defense. Other governmental agencies have joined the constant hunt for high quality external research and analysis on world affairs—from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to the departments of Transportation and Health and Human Services. This reflects, of course, the steady spread of American interests around the world, and the entry of global dynamics—trade, transportation, and science—into America’s “domestic” affairs. During my tenure in the Clinton administration, I saw a marked rise in the interest and attendance, at the highest levels, of traditional “domestic” department representatives at inter-agency meetings dealing with national security and international affairs. This has surely been accelerated after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Years ago our overseas embassies were staffed mainly by State Department employees; the percentage of non-State personnel has now risen to substantial levels. Equally interesting, the intelligence community, from the National Intelligence Council to the National Security Agency, has begun regularly to invite academics and others to organize substantive seminars, and even to give lectures on site.

The effects of globalization have wrought important changes beyond government. We see the growing involvement of non-profit NGOs, as well as private firms, that increasingly lobby governments on international affairs. NGOs and trade associations now act on their own or in concert, creating multiple direct ties to international actors, making their own *de facto* foreign policy. The global governance of the Internet, for example, is a complex amalgam of governments, firms, non-profits, and NGOs which all jockey to allocate or control scarce property in cyberspace (Mueller 2002). The recent flap over Google’s activities in the People’s Republic of China is a further example of these complexities, as company spokesmen were

hauled before a sub-committee of the House International Affairs Committee. This greater involvement in global governance has only whetted the appetites of non-state actors for more and more analytic work. Some of this they do themselves, other studies they commission; or think tanks and policy schools provide them with the kinds of shorter-term action-oriented analyses that help with project and policy design, as well as tactical considerations of implementation. In this light, the expansion of consulting firms around Washington (the so-called beltway bandits) has also created a much more complicated pattern to the demand for and supply of policy analysis.

Curiously, scholars tend to overlook these conditions on the demand side. Even writers sympathetic to enhancing scholar-practitioner linkages tend to focus exclusively (and somewhat narcissistically) on what scholars want to write, not on what practitioners say they need. It is useful to posit logical categories to clarify what practitioners want—as Lepgold and Nincic (2002) do—and even more useful to go out and ask actual practitioners what they really want, and what kinds of scholarly contributions would be most helpful in the conduct of their work (Wilson, forthcoming).

The Growing Complexity of the International Affairs Agenda

Finally, among the factors that have affected the changing institutional relationships between serious researchers and practitioners of many stripes is the rise onto the “high policy” agenda of new kinds of national security and foreign policy issues. The environment, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), the information revolution, the AIDS pandemic, terrorism, and threats from WMD have flooded the agenda of those charged with the conduct of international policy. In contrast to more traditional policy issues like arms control, bilateral diplomacy, or foreign aid, these newer substantive matters are often unfamiliar to senior policy-makers. They may not have studied them in college or graduate school and could easily have risen to senior foreign policy positions without experience in environmental affairs or international communications. Since senior policy-makers lack training and experience in these new areas, external analysts have an even greater role to play in bringing them up to speed on cyber-terrorism or the trade implications of GMOs.

Conclusion: Intersections and Implications

The complex intersection of these trends—institutional differentiation in the demand and supply of analysis; paradigm shifts within the scholarly disciplines; and the growing complexity of substantive issues central to the successful exercise of political authority—has put tremendous pressure on the traditional modalities linking analysis and action, and reduced the net societal value of political science departments.

The Good and the Bad

The new institutional arrangements provide both positive new possibilities as well as risks to all parties. On the positive side, individual scholars have wider choices in their careers, with the possibility for more congenial environments to pursue the kind of work they prefer. The traditional ivory-tower theorist and the more engaged strategist can find their own niches more easily. The novel arrangements also provide positive opportunities for practitioners. They too have a wider choice of topical expertise, analytic frameworks, and even modalities (a long book, a short report, a briefing, etc.) as they seek useful knowledge. Furthermore, both sides can benefit from more “custom tailoring,” streamlining how they want to interact with their counterparts—formally or informally, frequently or infrequently, etc. This can include short-term one-off studies, or medium and even long-term partnerships, whether for research or training and education. Unlike the elbow-patch professors of the past, today’s think tank experts are willing to closely tailor the project to meet the particular needs of practitioners for much more focused work with a faster pace from initial request to final delivery. Think tanks are in close proximity to senior policy-makers, and face-to-face briefings have become commonplace. Policy-makers can shop around to find the best fit between their own preferences and the substantive range, timeliness, depth, and ideological orientation of the institutions that supply analysis. At the same time, smart knowl-

edge managers can minimize biases by contracting with different suppliers for the same kind of work. With the sudden rise of so many tough “E-Issues” (e.g., environment, energy, e-commerce, etc.), having a wide range of sources of advice and analysis close by, and current on the latest issues, is a good thing for better practice.

But there are serious downsides to these new institutional arrangements that may serve neither the profession nor the public. Think tanks tend to specialize and drill deep but not wide; they can miss the broader societal and comparative contexts and the historical dimensions that social scientists in a regular department more readily provide. Academic social science also provides the nuance that policy briefs may miss (Barnett 2006). Practitioners risk losing the intellectual rigor of the social sciences. With pay-as-you-go, for-hire arrangements, there is always the risk that analysts will tell the clients only what they think they want to hear. Then there is the more subtle risk of reducing the creation and sharing of knowledge to just so many transactions, losing the logic of pursuing knowledge for its own sake. And in such an imperfect marketplace of ideas, those with the biggest budgets win.

The biggest risk to traditional political science departments is that over time they may become more homogeneous and narrow. Before the “great differentiation” I describe, a graduate student could seek out and find an array of orientations toward the practical and the theoretical within a single disciplinary department. As a graduate student at Berkeley in the 1970s I studied with Aaron Wildavsky, Ernst Haas, and Reinhard Bendix, three professors with very different mixes of attention to the practical and the theoretical. Under the new dispensation, today’s students may find narrower choices of faculty. So, new Ph.D.s with little interest in the likely impacts of their work on society will steer toward political science departments; others will also vote with their feet and find their way to policy schools to study, and eventually teach there or become practitioners. Political science then risks becoming even more insular, further confirming the critiques

of Putnam, Calhoun, and Holden. Neither the profession nor our students will be well-served by these trends. If students pass through traditional disciplinary programs (as most do today), then they risk being long on theory and short on understanding how scholarship can be usefully applied to real-world problems. The smaller numbers who get Ph.D.s (or MAs) in policy schools may have more desire and training for relevance but may be less well-educated in the methodological rigors taught by the traditional social sciences.

In my own department, about half of the graduate students go on to non-academic jobs. Will they be adequately prepared for their new professions if their professors themselves have little experience, few skills, or limited interest in posts beyond the academy, backed by condescending attitudes toward those who “settle” for non-academic jobs? More importantly, will these institutional trends serve our nation well in these times of tremendous social and political change, when “necessary knowledge” is in high demand? At a time of such ferment our discipline risks a slow decline into irrelevancy. This is not a call for lowering scholarly standards, but a call to maintain a full range of excellent, committed scholars capable of training graduate students and policy professionals, as well as educating undergraduates—the next generation of American citizens—about the many opportunities and challenges that await them in the wide world beyond the ivory towers.

The purpose of this short essay has been to provoke reflection on an important but insufficiently addressed trend in the profession, not to provide answers. The trend seems structural, secular, and institutional, and hence not easily susceptible to interventions by a single department chair or a faculty. Still, the trends hold serious implications for what we do as scholars, teachers, and citizens. As we reflect on these responsibilities, political scientists should keep in mind what we are losing and what we might still gain, and consider whether we are seeing the narrowing of intellectual space where thought and action should interact with as much freedom as possible.

Notes

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2. I thank Benjamin Barber for underscoring these distinctions.

3. “Engagement” can range from giving advice and consulting, to lectures, writing in policy-relevant journals, holding office, professional training, and so forth.

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