

The Perils of Buying Knowledge*

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I would like to begin by quoting from a memo I received from a staff member who had the job outlining the structure of the Title I study *we conducted for Congress.*

"The following is a suggested outline for the final report for your consideration:

Introduction

Chapter 1: Who Benefits?

Chapter 2: Who's in Charge?

Chapter 3: Who Learns?

Chapter 4: Who Cares?"

The focus of today's discussion has been on "Who Cares." That is, how can research be designed so that it is useful to its intended audience?

A lot has been written about how to do effective policy research. It is generally agreed that:

- The issues selected should be relevant to the intended audience.

In conducting research for Congress, it is important to remember that Congress makes decisions about money and program goals but, as a practical matter, can't do anything about the quality of teacher-child relationships. Therefore, a study of classroom interaction will not be much help to Congress.

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It is also agreed that:

- . Public policy reports should be timely.
- . Reports should be clear and understandable.
- . They should avoid jargon.
- . They should be relevant to the client's concerns.
- . Finally, everyone agrees that researchers should be objective. They should report implications, not recommendations; tradeoffs, not values. Research findings should not be based on the value judgements of the researchers--or of the agency for which they work.

Now since we know all of this and most of us have the incentive to do the best job we can, why aren't these proven guidelines for effective policy research carried out?

- . First, policy research directors rarely have either the money or the flexibility to hire the expert interdisciplinary staff needed to carry out a complex policy research agenda. But successful policy research depends on a mix of staff who combine strong research knowledge, awareness of the political process, judgement and, often, practical experience. These qualities are rare, expensive, and not readily available.
- . Second, study staff, by temperament, should not have strong ideological commitments to a particular research outcome.
- . Third, successful policy research depends on clients who have both expertise and a long-term interest in the subject matter. In the Title I study, we had the opportunity to

- work with highly motivated and capable Congressional ^{staff} who maintained continuing interest in the research and who helped formulate the issues *in a manner which provided information that was useful in the reauthorization process.*
- Research staff also need to avoid consensus and "lowest common denominator" pressures. Typically, there are many advocacy group and other pressures on a study. It is not possible for any study to satisfy the interests of all groups, each with different objectives. The study director, therefore, must acknowledge the difference of views, make some hard choices, and get on with the work.
 - Study directors must have the confidence to be clear both with their clients and with interest groups about what research can and cannot accomplish. Researchers should not agree to conduct an eight-year longitudinal study if their findings are needed for authorization hearings which will be held two years after the research begins--or worse, to answer meaningless questions which are not research but rather judgemental issues, for instance: "How poor should one be to receive a safety net?;" "Which is more important-- educational excellence or educational equity?;" "Would you rather be red or dead?"
 - Study directors must know that they have the support of their agency and that they will not be undercut by complaints of groups that are not pleased by their decisions.

- They also need clarity in terms of who they report to, who (if anyone) approves or can veto the reports, and whether recommendations need clearance. Directors must be free to deal with research issues rather than with bureaucratic pressures.
- The study staff should not be so threatening to the program it is evaluating that it cannot collect the needed data--or if some conflict is unavoidable, the staff should be aware of the problem and how to deal with it.
- Finally, study staff must have the agency and Congressional support needed to carry out objective research. We were fortunate to have bipartisan Congressional support and to be free from executive branch reporting, although the clearance issue was a difficult one. It is understandable, of course, that Secretaries of HEW did not view our freedom from clearance as a clear advantage to them. Secretary Califano expressed concern when Pat Graham, then Director of NIE, told him that the Title I legislation did not authorize him to clear the reports. Paul Hill has written about Secretary Weinberger's comment to me that such an "arrangement was unthinkable and therefore moot." Actually, Paul is being quite diplomatic. When I told the Secretary the legislation did not authorize clearance, he said something more like, "You must be kidding, lady."

There are, therefore, substantial risks in conducting policy research.

Plato summed it up quite simply more than 2,300 years ago:

"There is far greater peril in buying knowledge than in buying meat and drink."