So You Want to Be Policy-Relevant?

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During graduate school, the community of up and coming scholars who wanted to do policy-relevant research seemed a bit like Fight Club. It was something each of us secretly wanted to pursue but were reluctant to talk about in public. We found each other at those few conferences and workshops that were designed for folks like us such as SMAMOS, New Era, and even IQMR. More recently, as junior faculty, like-minded academics would come across each other at IPSI, the Next Generation Project, and Term Member gatherings of CFR.

Does it get better? For years, we have seen warnings and lamentations by some of our senior colleagues about the policy-academic divide (see here, here, here, here, here, here). Some attribute it to a rise in statistics and later game theory, others suggesting it has to do with the professional incentives that encourage scholars to eschew grand theory for more targeted, esoteric work in semi-obscure peer-reviewed outlets.

Can We Have it All: An Academic Perch and Policy Relevance?

After the events of September 11, 2001, policy-relevant work on terrorism and far-flung places like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq seemed to have no shortage of suitors from the policy world. Indeed, with the emergence of efforts like the Department of Defense's Minerva Initiative and the USAID-funded Higher Education Solutions Network, there has been serious money (in the United States) behind policy-relevant research.

We may be in for leaner times in an era of tights budgets and attacks on NSF-funded political science research, but even the Coburn amendment left space to support work relevant to national security. Readers in Europe and other places will have a better sense of whether difficult economic times have limited support for scholarship.

The landscape for political scientists to engage in policy-relevant work seems more open than its caricature. Indeed, with the rise of big data and the Nate Silvers of this world, the space for econometrics in policy-relevant work is wide open. In a recent study for policymakers, I even read about the implications for global climate governance derived from game theory. So, if the door is cracked open, what do we have to offer?

What are we Good at?

Contemporary international relations scholars by and large are trained to develop mid-range arguments to explain the past. Good scholars can use a variety of methods to question, unpack, and test causal associations and logics. Forecasting, with some exceptions, is not our stock in trade.

The policy community often has implicit if not explicit theories about how the world works. Advocates and policy entrepreneurs put forward causal connections all the time that may or may not be substantiated by evidence such as "poverty causes terrorism" or "droughts lead to conflict." Part of what we can do is test whether those asserted relationships are empirically supported. We can evaluate not only whether various factors go together but how they are related all along the causal chain.

For their part, policymakers often want some assurances that a given policy directed towards a specific problem will have its desired effect with a very high probability. That's a tall order, given that we are often dealing with tremendous uncertainty. It is also often difficult to know how good a fit the current policy problem is with the historical analogies and past patterns with which we are familiar.

That said, the careful effort to identify a range of plausible explanations and to evaluate the evidence for and against them can surface and challenge policymakers' assumptions, if they care to listen. Putting yourself in the best position to have them hear you is about all you can do, short of crossing over.

Strategies for Bridging the Gap

Are there any principles or strategies for how to think about doing policy relevant work?

Write well. Work on your craft. Be a good storyteller and be pithy. The traditional knock on academics is that our written work is inaccessible to non-specialists and too damn long. Don't be that cliché. Solid, charismatic presentation skills are a must as well.

Know a lot about something important. Choosing a topic based on what's in the news today might not be the best idea. That said, enduring problems or trouble areas like climate change and China will likely be good issues five years from now.

There is some utility in anticipating where you think global attention will be directed in the coming years. That said, the most important test, particularly when it comes to dissertation topics, is whether the issue is important enough to sustain you for a decade or more (the time it takes to finish the dissertation and get the book out based on it).

Learn who the players are. Who writes about the issue you care about? Follow them on Twitter. True policy insiders know all the ins and outs of current initiatives and who is up and who is down. Trying to compete at that game can be a full-time job, and this is not our comparative advantage. You want to know things and not just know people. Still, you should have some familiarity with what is going on right now and who the important people are.

Learn a language or a skill. When country X falls apart, area studies experts still are important. I don't think it's easy to be purely an area studies person these days, as you still need to have some conceptual and methodological tools to make sense of a place, but it's a start. Knowing the language and going there will give you some street cred. Other skills, of course, like econometrics, GIS, or experimental methods will make you more portable and useful to the academy and policy alike.

Develop a policy identity. You want to be known for something and for having a distinct point of view. That is something you will have to cultivate and is different from having a ready-made position. People who have idiosyncratic and interesting takes on the world (and not just ones that they assume to get attention) are compelling characters, particularly when they are bit unpredictable (I'm less likely to read someone if I can guess what they are going to say beforehand).

This is not a comprehensive list, and I've blogged about related themes on Duck of Minerva. Beyond these considerations, what else is there to know?

Lessons Learned

Getting started is always hard, but there are ways you can enhance your chances of getting an audience or an in to the policy community.

Proximity. Being in or near Washington, DC or another major policy center is not absolutely necessary, though it surely helps to come through periodically to keep one's connections fresh.

Getting Noticed. Even if you are not in DC or other policy metropole, people from the policy world may come to you if you are one of the leading experts on a topic that's trending. You may become a known quantity on a particular issue, and long-form writing is still our stock in trade. But, we have more diverse media—blogging, Twitter, Facebook even—that we can control to get the word out.

Connections and friendships can also be helpful. Americans citizens of the right age should apply for CFR Term Membership and/or the International Affairs Fellowship (IAF). Many influential academics and lapsed academics have enjoyed the IAF – Condoleezza Rice, Barry Posen, John Ikenberry, Charles Kupchan, Peter Feaver, Colin Kahl, Beth Simmons, just to name a few. I also found exchange programs like the GMF's Manfred Woerner seminar to be of tremendous utility for building networks.

Managing the Relationship. Let's say that you do get the invitation to do something for policy audiences, like a working paper for a think tank. Each institution and project may have distinct rhythms and processes. Some are very labor-intensive and the review process can be as, if not more, thorough than peer review. You may get comments and feedback from the head of the think tank on multiple drafts.

Sometimes, you may get pushed to make your argument stronger and less equivocal than you think is right. The think tanks will want you to begin to connect the dots and identify not only strategies for addressing the problem you wrote about but also the resources that are needed and which agencies should do what you recommend. For those of us trained to explain and describe general patterns, the specifics – agency X should spend $Y on Z – can be a stretch.

You may also be part of a grant with a donor from the policy community. Here, tailoring your research to what you think will be policy relevant can be tricky. Donors may not always have clear ideas about what research would be useful. You may get a grant but receive little guidance about what direction your research should take.

That may be a good thing, to the extent that this can allow you to pursue research that you think is interesting. It may not always be advantageous to have an especially involved donor/sponsor, particularly if your sponsor pushes you in ways that are inconsistent with your own instincts and research. Still, some engagement with them is what you are after so make an effort and don't always wait for them to come to you, even after they gave you money.

Making the Pitch. While you may be solicited to write for or brief policymakers, in other cases, you will have to pitch policy publications on a piece. That route is certainly harder and requires you to get in touch with the editor of the publication (which may require you to seek out contact information for individual editors). Don't just email the publication's generic email address and wait for them to get in touch. Persistence and multiple avenues (editors, assistant editors, follow-ups) may all be needed.

Beyond this, you need to have a good pitch. For articles, it's probably a paragraph, and here you will benefit from having an original contribution or unique perspective. Since you are not already a famous policymaker, this is a very high bar. Here, if you had the opportunity to travel to a place that is inaccessible or largely unknown to the wider world like North Korea, this may put you in good stead. If you have an original dataset or finding, this can be a point in your favor. One other strategy to break through with your pitch is to argue against the conventional wisdom or make an unpopular argument.

That can have its disadvantages. While there is often receptivity for publishing iconoclastic positions, you might find yourself making a rather extreme argument just to see your name in print. In an effort to be punchy, you might overshoot the mark and come across as reckless. This can be especially damaging if your writing for academic circles does not jibe with what you write for policy audiences.

Think About Your Academic Reputation. The extra money from one of these writing assignments is always nice, but as the previous comment implied, you can damage your brand as a serious scholar by writing a crappy op-ed or doing shoddy policy work. You can also hurt your ability to get a first job or tenure.

If you do policy work en route to tenure, don't count on a Brookings Institution paper or a *Foreign Affairs* article to get you over the hump even at a policy school. At best, it will be neutral for your tenure file. Schools like the publicity, but I don't think any of that work counts for your tenure case, so you will have to do as much output in scholarly outlets as everybody else *and* your policy work.

In short, the so-called distance between policy and academia is often overstated. There are plenty of opportunities to engage on issues you care about and meet like-minded peers if you approach the process with clear eyes and dogged determination.

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