

Linking Academic Research and Social Policy: Rethinking the Roles and Responsibilities of the Urban and Metropolitan University

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Abstract

We present a case study of how our College has risen to the challenge brought about by the unintended consequences of the No Child Left Behind Act. We describe the steps in our journey, including framing research questions responsive to community needs, providing support for faculty to embrace “engaged” scholarship, and working with lawmakers to shape a legislative agenda. Our discussion focuses on how we facilitated this vital link between research and social policy.

In 1905, R. W. Harper extolled the critical importance of the urban university, proclaiming it to be “the prophetic interpreter of democracy; the prophet of her past in all its vicissitudes; the prophet of her present, in all its complexity; the prophet of her future, in all its possibilities” (1905, 19-20). He asserted that such institutions had a responsibility to welcome students from all walks of life (not just the intellectual elite) and to provide a context where scholars could dedicate their intellectual talents and personal energies to addressing the pressing issues of their communities (not just the more rarified topics of classical scholarship).

In the century since Harper shared this vision, many scholars have echoed his sentiment, although in arguably less dramatic terms. Boyer (1990), for example, in his landmark volume, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, urged the academy to broaden its horizons and embrace many forms of engaged scholarship, so as to ensure authentic and relevant partnerships among scholars and between the university and its surrounding community. While he recognized that many profound social advances had been initiated from within the walls of the academy, he cautioned that “still, linkages between the campus and contemporary problems must be strengthened,” that “higher education and the rest of society have never been more interdependent than they are today”... “[and our] nation’s schools...cry out for the application of knowledge that faculty can provide” (1990, 76-77). In a similar vein, in a critical analysis of the role of institutions in contemporary American society, Bellah and his colleagues (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton 1991) conclude that the modern university must not shirk its professional responsibilities to the broader public. In the same period, Bok warned of the dangers of detachment when he wrote: “Armed with the

security of tenure and the time to study the world with care, professors would appear to have a unique opportunity to act as society's scouts to signal impending problems long before they are visible to others. Yet rarely have members of the academy succeeded in discovering the emerging issues and bringing them vividly to the attention of the public" (1990, 105).

More recently still and closer to home, in his keynote address to the 2003 Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities Conference, James Votruba argued for authentic community engagement on the part of institutions of higher education. He called upon colleges and universities to be(come) fully committed to "direct, two-way interaction with communities and other external constituencies, through the development, exchange, and application of knowledge, information, and expertise for mutual benefit."

But how to proceed, and where to engage? Anyon directs us to reach beyond our immediate communities and to work, instead, or perhaps in addition, with those institutions that indirectly, albeit fundamentally, affect the course of our everyday lives. She urges us to become politically engaged, to do what we do best—formulate research questions and then gather and analyze the appropriate information—and bring the results of our work to bear in places where they can make a difference. She writes, "In order to know how to work against the social forces that impinge on educational equity, we need to identify oppressive policies and practices and document their effects....Once we know the power of exclusionary and oppressive social forces like these to affect the quality and extent of educational offerings, we can more successfully aim our efforts at dislodging those determinants" (2006, 22).

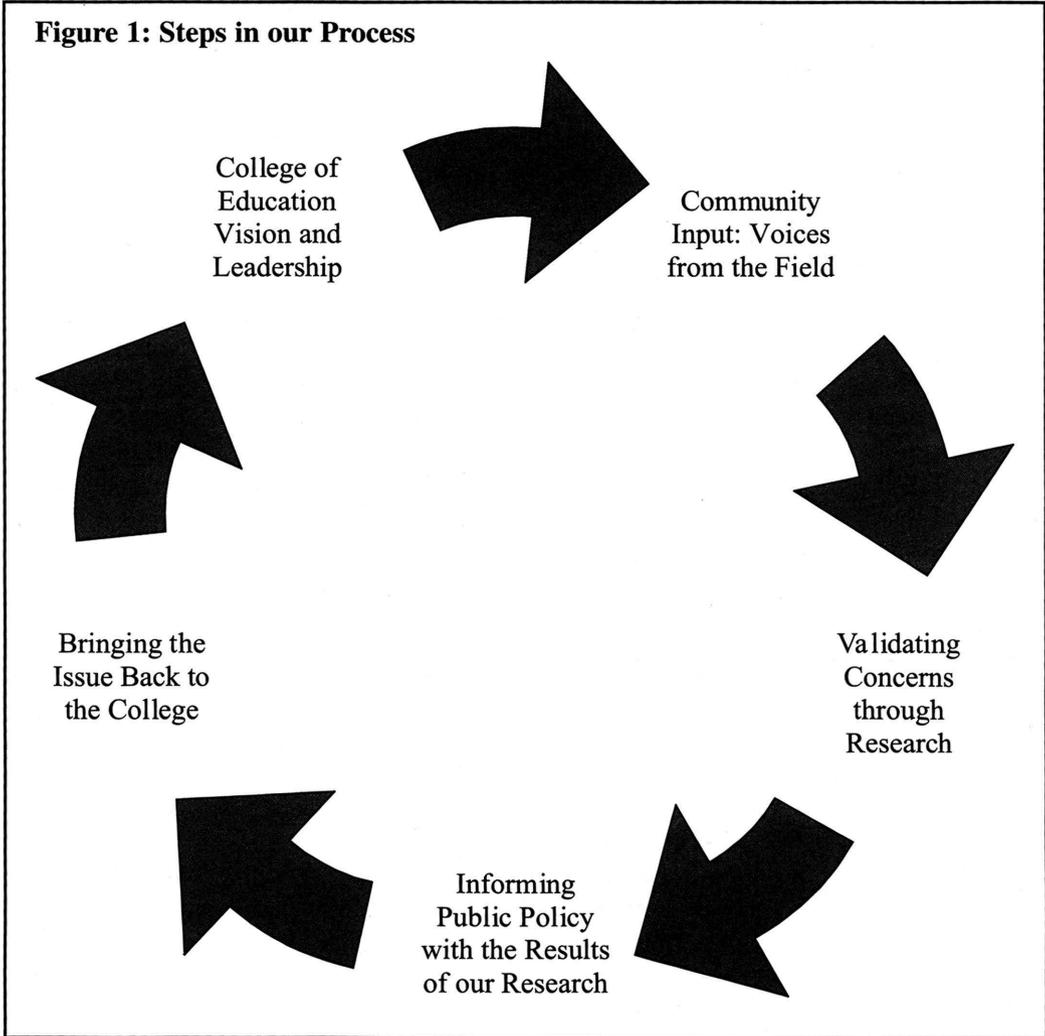
We argue that nowhere is this call to action more critical than in the arena of policy guiding public education. Below, we present a case study of how our College of Education has risen to the challenge brought about by the unintended consequences of the No Child Left Behind Act. We describe the steps in our journey, including: (1) framing research questions responsive to community needs, (2) collecting and analyzing relevant data, (3) articulating how our findings can contribute to the larger public dialogue, (4) providing professional development to enable faculty to engage in the advocacy process, and (5) working with lawmakers to shape a legislative agenda. Our discussion focuses on what university leaders can do to facilitate this vital link between research and social policy.

Setting the Context

Located in the heart of one of California's largest cities, San Jose State University is the quintessential urban and metropolitan university. Our campus draws students from all walks of life, from our immediate community and from far away, from a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. When it was founded nearly 150 years ago, it was the first institution of teacher preparation west of the Mississippi River. Still today, one of its central missions is to prepare teachers and administrators for California's public schools. To this end, faculty members from all eight SJSU colleges

work closely with one another and with partners in our community to prepare quality educators who can serve the needs of the children in our local K-12 schools. As the demographics and socio-economics of the state have changed, our task has become more challenging. In our relentless pursuit of “excellence and equity” in education, we have re-examined the role we must play in order to ensure that every child can be inspired and guided by a truly highly qualified teacher.

Few reforms of American public education have been as sweeping as those brought about by the authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001. There was little disagreement with the goal of the No Child Left Behind legislation—to ensure that every child be guaranteed access to highly qualified, effective teachers, and to close the achievement gap. In the report that follows, we share our case study and what we found when we more closely examined the impact of that legislation on our own community. Figure 1 highlights the steps in our process.



College of Education Vision and Leadership

As part of an on-going cycle of reflection and self-assessment, the College revisited its Mission Statement. As faculty engaged in both formal and informal discussions of the local, state and national educational landscape, it became apparent that our schools, and the nature and needs of the children and families that they served, were changing. For decades, we had found ourselves at the hub of a multicultural mecca. Students in our K-12 schools spoke as many as one hundred different languages at home. Many of our schools enrolled a majority of students whose first language was not English and whose parents spoke little, if any, English. For all of the wealth that appeared to spread throughout the Silicon Valley in the magical years of the “dot.com” boom, many of our schools served a majority of families whose incomes qualified them for free and reduced lunches. And while we continued to adapt our curricular offerings and professional training to enable our graduates to be both multiculturally literate and multiculturally competent, we began to feel that we were fighting an uphill battle. It became clear that trying to address the problems at the immediate “microsystem” level (Bronfenbrenner 1979) was likely to prove no more effective than “rearranging the deck furniture on the Titanic,” as the expression goes. The Dean’s office led the way in our College’s growing recognition that a significant part of the solution lay elsewhere. It was becoming evident that public policy and legislation, that is “exosystem” level factors, (Bronfenbrenner 1979) were now the most powerful driving forces shaping day to day life in our local public schools.

To launch this effort, the centerpiece of our next College-wide retreat was a primer by the University’s governmental relations officer to help individual faculty develop the knowledge and skills to assume more proactive roles in advocating for the educational needs of our community’s K-12 students as well as those of the future educators we were preparing. At the same time, the Dean facilitated growing faculty interest by formalizing our commitment to engage in the political arena. To that end, our Equity Advocacy and Policy Committee was formed and charged with the responsibility to lead the new initiative to link research and public policy. The committee hosted “Legislative Breakfasts” where our local elected representatives could sit with our faculty and discuss educational issues in a way that could inform their legislative agendas. Faculty emerged from these events with a clearer picture of how the legislative process really worked. Legislators emerged with a better understanding of how to enhance children’s educational success. These breakfasts provided clear and compelling evidence of the value of collaborating in crafting legislation that would shape the daily experiences of the children and adults in our K-12 schools.

Community Input: Voices from the Field

Meanwhile, a troubling theme had begun to emerge in the comments and reflections of our student teachers. Over and over again, they reported that the pedagogies they were reading and learning about in their coursework were nowhere to be found in the classrooms they visited. They were discouraged, and sometimes even forbidden from spending time teaching anything other than Reading, Language Arts and Math. They were urged, instead, to help prepare their students for upcoming standardized tests. As

we began to consider how to interpret and respond to their concerns, we realized how much the problem extended beyond our local schools. The words of our student teachers were echoed in the comments of educational policy analysts (Center for Educational Policy 2006).

This confluence of voices compelled us to wonder and worry about the potential unintended consequences of the high stakes accountability system associated with the requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation. Our legislative partners were equally concerned, and they encouraged us to provide them with more than just “stories.” They also needed “statistics.” And so, we set out to look more systematically at the scope of the problem and to identify prospective solutions.

Validating Concerns Through Research

We worked in partnership with the Santa Clara County Office of Education to survey practicing K-6 teachers from throughout our community. A total of 917 teachers, from 171 schools located in 32 school districts across the county participated in our research study. Slightly less than half of these teachers taught in schools that are categorized as “high priority” schools, where 50 % or more of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Nearly half of the schools represented in our sample had not met their Academic Performance Index growth targets for 2003-04, the academic year immediately preceding data collection. The proportion of English Language Learners in the participating teachers’ classrooms ranged widely (from 0-100 %, mean = 42.7 %, median = 33 %).

The first question we asked was, *how much instructional time each week did teachers spend teaching Art, Math, Music, Physical Education, Reading/Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies?* Our findings were consistent with the pattern that was emerging nationwide.

- Overall, very little time was spent teaching Art, Music or Physical Education. In fact, across grades and schools, over 95 % of teachers reported that they spent “less than 1-2 hours” per week teaching Art or Music. And 86 % reported that their students received “less than 1-2 hours” of Physical Education instruction per week.
- Very little time was devoted to teaching Science or Social Studies. Over half the teachers sampled (55.6 %) indicated they spent “less than 1-2 hours” per week teaching Science. An additional third (36.4 %) indicated they spent “3-4 hours” per week on Science. Only 2 % reported spending over “8-9 hours” per week on the subject. A nearly identical picture emerged for Social Studies, with over half of the teachers we sampled (55.4 %) indicating that they spent “less than 1-2 hours” per week on the subject, and a third (35.7 %) reporting as much as “3-4 hours” per week on the subject.
- More time was spent teaching Math, with most teachers (60 %) reporting that they spend “5-6 hours” per week on that subject, and an additional 18 % indicated that

they spent “6-7 hours” on the subject, and just over 10 % of teachers indicating that they spent even more time than that on Math.

- By far, the most instructional time was devoted to Reading/Language Arts. More than half of the teachers responding to the survey indicated that they spent at least “8-9 hours” per week on the subject. Indeed, over one-third of the teachers (37.5 %) indicated that they spent over 10 hours per week on Reading/Language Arts.

The second question we sought to answer was *whether there was a difference in how instructional time was spent between teachers who serve in high priority schools and those who serve a more affluent population of students*. This question was of particular significance, inasmuch as much of what prompted the need for the No Child Left Behind legislation in the first place was growing concern about the magnitude of the achievement gap between children in schools serving more and less affluent communities. Once again, our “statistics” were consistent with our students’ “stories.” A series of one-way ANOVA’s revealed significant differences in how instructional time was distributed in these different types of environments. Teachers in high priority schools devoted more time to Reading/Language Arts ($F = 32.093$, $p = .000$), and less time to Science ($F = 5.205$, $p = .023$) and Social Studies ($F = 12.370$, $p = .000$). Teachers in high priority schools also tended to spend less time teaching Art and Physical Education ($F = 3.520$, $p = .061$ and $F = 2.910$, $p = .088$, respectively).

The third question we asked was *how many days each school year teachers reported spending preparing students to take standardized tests and whether there was a difference between high priority and more affluent schools*. Overall nearly two-thirds (61.5 %) of the teachers in our sample indicated that they spent more than ten days per year preparing their students to take the standardized tests. Teachers in high priority schools devoted significantly more time to preparing for standardized tests than their peers in more affluent schools ($F = 28.776$, $p = .000$). And teachers whose schools that had not met their testing target the previous year spent significantly more time preparing their students for standardized tests ($F = 18.713$, $p = .000$).

The final question on our survey invited teachers to describe *how they would structure their teaching time in an “ideal world.”* A total of 309 teachers in high priority schools and 451 teachers in more affluent schools responded to this question. A content analysis of their responses suggested some unexpected similarities as well as some striking differences in the responses of these two groups of teachers. A small proportion of our respondents (49 teachers, less than 7 % of our sample) indicated that they were pleased with their circumstances as they are, and that they would not change things in their ‘ideal’ world. Teachers in the more affluent schools were more than twice as likely as the teachers in the high priority schools to state that their weeks were fine as is (8.2 % versus 3.9 % $X^2 = 5.41$, $p < .05$).

Responses from the rest of our sample fell into three broad categories. The first category consisted of *changes they would make to the curriculum or to their instructional practices*. Teachers’ most frequent suggestion (cited by nearly a third of

our sample) was that they would include more Art, more Music, more PE, more Science and more Social Studies in their children's education. A significant number of teachers indicated that they would use more integrated or thematic approaches to teaching. They suggested this would be an effective means of "sneaking" Science and Social Studies content into their teaching. Nearly a quarter of the sample indicated that they would like to have time to delve more deeply into content, and to provide more creative opportunities for their students and to choose more engaging and contemporary curriculum materials.

Second, the topic of *standardized testing* was broached by less than a quarter of our teachers. While roughly 10 percent of them noted that they would like to see less time and effort dedicated to standardized tests, most teachers who commented on testing acknowledged the importance of accountability and assessment. They did not want to "do away with testing altogether." They simply wanted it to be incorporated into the school year in a "more humane," "developmentally appropriate," and "authentic" manner. They wished school administrators could "keep testing in perspective." "After all," as one second grade teacher commented, "pigs don't get fatter from being weighed."

The third broad category that emerged from the teachers' responses pertained to their *roles as professionals*. Many teachers expressed a desire for more autonomy or flexibility and permission to select their own curriculum materials. Many expressed a desire for more planning time. Interestingly, these responses were roughly twice as common among teachers in high priority schools as among teachers in more affluent ones, and in the schools that had failed to meet their targets than in the schools that had met theirs.

Informing Public Policy with Results of Research

When we completed our data analyses, we realized that our findings should be disseminated beyond traditional academic journals. We accepted an invitation from the Governmental Relations Committee of the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education to come to the nation's capital and participate in a "Day on the Hill." There, we were afforded the opportunity to share our research with members of our Congressional delegation. They were beginning to prepare for their discussions of the reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and we found them extremely responsive to our work. They were grateful for the "stories and statistics" and asked thoughtful questions about the data. They were intrigued by the teachers' more nuanced perspectives on the narrowing of the curriculum and the pressure to "teach to the test" and by their creative suggestions. They were appreciative of the opportunity to engage in data-driven discussions of the issues and indicated that this information served as a reminder to ensure that the legislation meets the intention and the spirit of the Act.

Bringing the Issue Back to the College

Upon our return to campus, we shared our Washington experience with our Equity, Advocacy, and Policy Committee and we presented our work at a College-wide Forum. We were gratified by the high level of interest exhibited by our colleagues in both of these settings. Many of our faculty found themselves passionately drawn toward issues of educational equity, and indeed, many of them had made such topics cornerstone constructs under-girding their teaching. They had been deeply troubled by what they perceived to be abrogated rights of access to quality education for many of our community's children, and many had sought ways to become actively engaged in the political dialogues in their communities. Yet they had not framed their research and scholarship to make the fruits of their labors relevant beyond the walls of academia. Their plight was hardly unusual. The traditional view that honors "discovery" research, a view embedded in so many higher education settings, frequently creates a significant obstacle for faculty who might otherwise engage in innovative forms of intellectual endeavor, reflecting a broader notion of scholarship that includes integrated and applied research (Percy, Zimpher, and Brukardt 2006). Our conversations turned to considering ways to nurture the climate of "engaged scholarship" (Boyer 1990) which was clearly ready to take root in the College.

Our next step was to focus on creating an infrastructure that would support faculty as they pursued this new path of professional endeavor. It was imperative that the efforts and products of faculty who dedicated themselves to linking research and public policy be fully recognized as legitimate forms of scholarship. The College leadership worked with our Retention, Tenure, and Promotion Committee to develop a document entitled, "Alternative Forms of Scholarship for the College of Education." This document, now vetted through the appropriate university structures, can be included in faculty members' dossiers, where it serves as a lens to inform review committees from across the university, as they evaluate our faculty's work. This document represents a tangible artifact in our College's commitment to legitimizing and supporting the work of faculty who engage in innovative and relevant forms of scholarship. It is also a key element in beginning to establish our reputation as an "engaged" College. The College has also provided workshops and individual consultation for faculty to assist them in articulating a framework to plan, implement and assess their scholarship (Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff 1997).

Essential "Ingredients" for Linking Academic Research and Social Policy

Since the decade of the 1990s there has been considerable attention paid to the role and responsibilities of the modern university as co-equal partners in civic missions (Colby et al. 2006; Percy, Zimpher, and Brukardt 2006). And there are perhaps many "recipes" that result in collaborations that are authentically beneficial to all parties concerned, but we would like to close by enumerating the key ingredients that set the stage for our success.

The first ingredient was a crisis—an urgent, serious and far-reaching problem which threatened to cause grave damage to our community and its children. As well-intentioned as the No Child Left Behind legislation might have been, the realities of everyday life in contemporary classrooms were changing, but in a direction that seemed antithetical to the spirit of the law.

The second ingredient was a passionate and caring faculty. It was evident in their informal conversations that they were dismayed that with each passing year, children would fall farther behind, and teachers would become increasingly disillusioned. Unable to turn the tide by themselves, they welcomed the opportunity to channel their concerns in a constructive and collaborative manner.

The third ingredient was a College leader who clearly recognized the threat posed by the legislative landscape, and who was willing and able to champion a creative and proactive response to the crisis. The endeavor required a person who could articulately and passionately capture the vision of positioning the College into the arena of community relevance that extended to policy and advocacy. It required a person who could bring to the forefront much of the work that faculty were already doing and who could show how the impact of their work could be amplified. It required a person who was deliberate about opening lines of communication between legislators and faculty so that many of our faculty could come to see their role in the political process as a natural part of their academic role.

Two recent experiences have served as evidence for the progress we have made. The first was an invitation by one of our legislators to submit our own legislative agenda. He recognized from interacting with faculty at previous College-hosted events that we had already developed research and momentum around key issues in our community and with a little additional effort, these issues could be shaped into an agenda that could be moved forward. The second experience occurred during a recent educator awards dinner where we were asked by one of the invited legislators when our next legislative breakfast was scheduled. She commented that the information presented by faculty at previous breakfasts kept her updated on educational issues and wanted us to keep her on the invitation list for our next event. These anecdotes serve as fuel to help sustain our high-energy efforts to create a substantive and meaningful dialogue among scholars, politicians, and the broader community.

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