Purposes/Goals

The idea behind this course is fairly straightforward. We will use the semester to explore an issue that occurs sooner or later to anyone who works in the so-called knowledge industry. Namely, social scientists generate massive quantities of research findings each year, yet these findings seem to have negligible influence on social and educational policy decisions made by legislatures and policy boards.

We will approach this issue by several means. First, we will do some historical reading about the rise of the social scientific establishment in the U.S., and the ideas about planning and analysis typically possessed by members of that establishment. Next we will look at several concepts that should help us clarify our thinking about this problem, along with some “models” of knowledge utilization. Following this, we will look at the roles of policy experts, think tanks, and philanthropic organizations in the social research knowledge business.

We then turn to an array of interesting and controversial cases from recent decades that have influenced the knowledge and policy interaction. As the course winds down we will consider an intriguing argument by Charles Lindblom about the role of social research knowledge in society. And we will conclude with the views of individuals who work in the policy arena, and with reports from class members about their own research projects.

By semester’s end, we should have created the necessary “mental furniture” for thinking seriously about the politics of social research knowledge in the American polity.

Readings

We will rely for this course on three books, listed below, and on a selection of additional articles and book chapters. I will make available the articles and book chapters to the class so members can duplicate them for their own use.


Course Requirements/Assignments

I will, of course, expect you to have read closely the assigned materials for each course session, and come prepared to discuss the readings thoughtfully. As you will notice from the syllabus, most of the reading assignments fall during the first two-thirds of the semester, which will allow you time during the last few weeks to concentrate on your paper. **Class Participation (10% of grade)**

In addition to the paper, discussed below, there will be two shorter writing assignments due earlier in the semester:

*Book Review (4 pages) — To help get you jump-started on course matters, I am obliging you to choose a book to read that is roughly within the domain of social research knowledge politics, and which you will summarize and critique for me. I will supply a bibliography from which to choose, although you may select an item not on the list but which is nevertheless relevant. If you choose an unlisted book, then show it to me so I can approve it. **Due February 18, 1999 (15% of grade)***

*Oral Report/Written Synopsis (4 pages) — Each member of the seminar will choose one class session, and will prepare a brief (10-15 minute) oral report summarizing and critiquing the reading assignments for that session (required readings, not optional readings). One week later you will need to turn in a 4 page written version of the presentation. In both the oral and written reports, focus on gleaning the arguments made by the author(s). **Variable Due Dates (15% of grade)***

Research Paper Project

As with most seminars, your grade will be based largely upon a research paper project. I intend to give you considerable flexibility in terms of topic, but it should be clearly relevant to the general concerns of the course, and we should probably discuss your topic before you begin.

Here are some possible approaches, although do not be constrained by this list. The best case scenario would be for you to choose a topic of enduring interest to you and examine it from a “politics of social research knowledge” perspective. **(Due May 5, 1999; @ 15 pages; 60% of grade)**

* Choose a social research study controversy, and provide a review and analysis thereof.
* Choose a piece of federal or state legislation, and investigate the extent to which social research knowledge shaped or affected that legislation.
* Profile the work of a state or federal commission charged with reviewing policy in some issue area.
* Profile an important figure, e.g. a high visibility academic or academic-turned-politician, and describe his or her orientation toward social research and some efforts to utilize social research for policy or political purposes.
* Study some area of education research on which there is scholarly disagreement, and discuss the effects of this disagreement on policy in that area.
* Apply one or more models of knowledge utilization to some area of policy, to determine how accurately these models capture social research “use” in that policy domain.
The Nature of the Problem, the Value of the Inquiry

“The first and most important general observation I derive from these experiences [with federal policymaking efforts] is that only rarely have I witnessed serious governmental attention being given to serious social science research. That, of course, is what anyone would expect who is familiar with the maintenance and enhancement needs of bureaucratic organizations. I will make an even stronger statement. I have only rarely observed serious social science being present to government agencies. If the latter is true, then the lack of any serious governmental response to social science is explicable on grounds quite different from organizational imperatives: there is nothing to which a response can or should be made. I suspect that in fact both mechanisms—organizational needs and social science inadequacy—are at work simultaneously.”

James Q. Wilson

Reading:

Class 3: January 28

Historical Overview II: Research Knowledge and Disillusionment in the 1960s

Reading:

James A. Smith, Chapters 6-7 (pp. 122-166), The Idea Brokers


Optional:


Class 4: February 4

Worthwhile Concepts

Reading:

A. Varieties of Research Knowledge “Use”


B. Academic vs. Applied Research


Class 5: February 11

Explain Limitations on Social Research Knowledge Use:
“Models” of Utilization

Reading:

A. The Two-Communities Theory
B. Organizational and Policy-Environment Theories
C. Enlightenment and Interaction as Theoretical Foci
B. Critical Approaches: Anti-Positivism and Value Criticism


Optional:


Class 6: February 18

Bridging the Gap: Experts and Policy Entrepreneurs

Reading:


Class 7: February 25

Think Tanks and Policy Research Centers:
New Institutions for Social Research Knowledge Production

Reading:

Smith, The Idea Brokers, Chapters 8 - 10, pp. 167-239.
Class 8: March 4

The Philanthropies and Knowledge Politics:
Carnegie Corporation as a Case Study

Reading:


Class 9 March 11

Cases of Note I:

Reading:

A. Pre-Brown Race Policy


B. The Coleman Report


Optional:


Break: March 15-20
Class 10: March 25

Cases of Note II:

Reading:

A. The Moynihan Report


B. Race and Education


Class 11: April 1

Lindblom’s Alternative Approach I: “Probing”

Reading:


Class 12: April 8

Lindblom’s Alternative Approach II: “The Self-Guided Society”

Reading:

Class 13: April 15

Views from the Trenches: Guest Speakers

Michael T. Childress, Executive Director, Kentucky Long-Term Policy Research Center, Frankfort, Kentucky.

Carolyn Witt Jones, Director, Partnership for Kentucky Schools, Lexington, Kentucky

Class 14: April 22

No Class—AERA Convention

Class 15: April 29

Student Research Project Discussions

Paper Due: May 5