

# The Politics of Knowledge

## Why Education Research Does (or Does Not) Influence Education Policy

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The American Enterprise Institute

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The collected papers from this conference are available online  
at [www.aei.org/event1455](http://www.aei.org/event1455).

# What Gets Studied and Why: Examining the Incentives that Drive Education Research

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## The Demand Side: Who Wants Educational Research?

- Complex and fragmented decisionmaking structure
  - Influencers (e.g. special interests) are important consumers
  - Intermediaries transmit findings to parents/public
  - Producers are key consumers (e.g. regulate quality)
  - Good research makes for better policy, but post-hoc, decision makers may not want independent research
- Research consumers may be disconnected from funders
  - Limited private sector R&D
  - Public good nature of research output encourages free-riding
  - Mechanisms to aggregate consumers' preferences are limited
- Research consumers can't easily delineate good from bad
  - There's research to support any position

## The Supply Side: Who Produces Education Research?

- Produced by individuals operating in widely different institutional contexts
  - *Soft money operations.* Strong alignment of research with client needs, but contract work rarely addresses broad school issues and political considerations weigh heavily
  - *Hard money institutions.* Greater flexibility to explore key issues, but these often have a strong ideological bent
- University professors still produce the great majority of research
  - Housed in disciplinary-based ‘silos’
  - Faculty motivated by tenure, judged by peers
  - External funding a plus but not essential
  - Institutions change very slowly

## University Dominance of Supply Side is Problematic

- University's Schools of Education established to train practitioners, with weak research tradition
  - Focus on local context
  - Qualitative research; weak understanding of research design
  - Reinforces K-12 public monopoly status quo; avoids outcome-oriented causal questions
  - Conflict of interest
- Faculty outside of education may have limited knowledge of the politics of education reform and/or school context/culture
- On the whole, the incentives at universities encourage small scale (often qualitative) research that explores the status quo

## Funders of Education Research Have Limited Market Leverage

- Overall level of funding is low, limiting efficacy of research
- Split across multiple agencies
- Short term political direction to some federal research; idiosyncratic private funders
- Benefit from (and even encourage) short-term publicity to demonstrate “impact”

## Improving Incentives Will Take Time

- Recent IES and philanthropic-consortia *have* begun to improve relevance and rigor of education research
  - Impact is limited by relatively low funding levels and University's ability/will to change
- Disconnect between consumers and funders is hard to overcome
  - Reduce fragmentation of federal funding among agencies; few larger-scale studies
  - Could public incentives be used to encourage research by state- or district-level consortia?
  - Could public incentives be offered to private sector for R&D?
- Need for reconsideration of quality-control mechanisms within academia and in funding review process

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