

STATE POLICY AND UNIVERSITY RESEARCH:

A PANEL DISCUSSION

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During the past two days, we have heard about several state and federal programs that are designed to support university research. These programs reflect the fact that research and discovery have fundamental importance to society and that it is in our collective interest to support these activities. At the same time, the specific forms of these programs reflect the reality of the give-and-take in the political process. They also reflect the financial limitations that any state faces when implementing policy or initiating new programs.

I believe that we have an opportunity to reaffirm the relationship between public policy development and research, and to rethink the potential breadth of that relationship. As a beginning point, we should recognize that the relationship between state policy and university research is bi-directional, in that:

- Research should inform public policy
- Policy decisions often direct/fund research

If research is truly in our collective best interest, then we should work to ensure that the outcomes of research result in changes in society. One of the most fundamental means for realizing social change is the legislative process, so it follows that there should be reasoned mechanisms in place for ensuring that scientific results yield legislative results. It is striking, in fact, how the term “results” is used differently by scientists and by legislators. On-campus, the question: “What were your results?” might produce a response such as: “A small, but significant effect for the experimental conditions; more importantly, however, we believe that the stimuli we produced for the second experiment have great potential as a general diagnostic measure.” Needless to say, the same question, “What were your results?” will yield a VERY different response on the floor of the House of Representatives. There, the primary measure of import is the creation of new laws, and more specifically new laws that reflect the priorities of specific legislators.

In Kansas, we have had some success in developing mechanisms for moving research into the public policy arena. Good examples include the Kansas Geological Survey, the Institute for Public Policy and Business Research at the University of Kansas, and the Agricultural Research and Extension programs at Kansas State University. On the other hand, Kansas Technology Enterprise Corporation (K-TEC) is an excellent example of legislative action directly affecting (and stimulating) research. One might ask why it is that with these, and similar programs in place, one of the primary and chronic complaints leveled at the academy is that we are out-of-touch and that our work is unrelated to the “real world.” While at the same time, legislators routinely face criticism for making decisions in an information vacuum. Why is it that these two natural allies (researchers and policy makers) haven’t taken better advantage of a partnership to correct these complementary criticisms? To begin the discussion, I would offer the following points for your consideration:

- There is a mismatch between areas of legislative interest and the visibility of the programs for informing decision-making.
- There is only a limited overlap in the organizational models of the academy and the legislature.
- Legislative, university, and research timelines are inherently different.
- There is an inherent tension between the “independence” of research and the “public” nature of policy decisions.

There is a mismatch between areas of legislative interest and the visibility of the programs for informing decision-making. In Kansas, and in many other states, the legislature is increasingly concerned with a small set of human service issues: providing social services to those most in need (SRS waiting lists), criminal justice (new Juvenile Justice Authority), health (Medicare/Medicaid, access to prescription drugs, tobacco abuse, uninsured children, abortion) and education (K-12 funding formula, higher education). Indeed, the current state budget devotes approximately 85% of its funds to education and human services, compared with 0.8% for agriculture and natural resources. Yet we have failed to bring together legislators and university scientists whose research involves human services, despite the successful collaborative model of the Geologic Survey and the Agricultural Extension. Similarly, K-TEC promotes research in four targeted areas that are important to the future economic vitality of the state, but there is no parallel unit targeting issues that dominate the legislative agenda. This state of affairs can be viewed as a mismatch, or simply an incomplete system, where our research results are not equally available to policy-makers across all topics and issues. We in

the academy should recognize the need to increase the visibility of existing programs across the **full range** of academic and societal topics. At the same time, the legislature should encourage the development of mechanisms to link scientists and their work with ongoing policy discussions.

There is only a limited overlap in the organizational models of academe and the legislature. Universities are organized by discipline and the organization is realized as departments, centers, colleges, etc. The legislature is organized by topic (e.g. education, agriculture, utilities, etc.) and by activity (e.g. appropriations, calendar) and this organization is realized as committees. Putting aside the differences in what is included within categories of the same name (e.g. education) in the two groups, there are many more disciplines in universities than there are topic-related committees in the legislature. Moreover, the natural scientific tendency to work in “interdisciplinary” fields risks exacerbating the mismatch between the two systems. Thus, to link policy and research, we must devise mechanisms that bridge existing structures in both domains.

Legislative, university, and research timelines are inherently different. If “Timing is everything!” then we face serious challenges if our goal is to enhance the linkage between research and policy development. Science is a long-term process that builds directly and systematically on previous efforts. Individual scholars accept that their work may take months or years to come to fruition. And while they realize that something might happen tomorrow that would cause them to drop what they’re doing and pursue some new idea or project, they expect to spend most of their lives focusing on similar topics and issues.

Institutions, in support of research, build administrative processes, physical plants, and infrastructure that are designed to serve the long-term purposes of the university. Institutional leaders invest in research clusters or departments with an acknowledged research strength and not in individual scientists and their agendas. A new electron microscope, for example, is purchased with the expectation that a group of scientists will use the instrument for various experiments (the details of which cannot even be predicted at the time of purchase) for several years into the future, and the investment is made with the belief that enough interest in related topics will persist to justify the purchase.

The legislature, by contrast, operates on a fixed calendar, which is determined *a priori* and separate from the nature of the topics to be discussed. In Kansas the timeline is no more than 90 days/year, regardless of the issues. As a result, all of the work and deliberations necessary for making any decision must fit within this time scale. Even ignoring the real constraints imposed on this process by the politics of the

body, this 90-day time limit creates a compelling need to “generate results” and inevitably leads to hurried decisions and/or legislative “game-playing” with deadline extensions. Similarly, the topics to be addressed by the legislature are only partially under the control of the body. Many issues are thrust upon them by events outside of their control. In addition, the composition of the membership itself is not stable, which enhances the volatility of the environment and the press for action.

The following table highlights the differences among these three partners in research and policy development.

	Personnel	Topics	Timeline
Researchers	stable	stable	volatile
Institutions	stable	stable	stable (long)
Legislature	volatile	volatile	stable (short)

There is an inherent tension between the “independence” of research and the “public” nature of policy decisions. To be effective, science must be independently driven and free from political pressure. Generating legislation is a political process. In our bi-directional relationship, any attempt by the legislature to direct research activity (even through mechanisms like K-TEC) runs the risk of sacrificing scientific independence. The primary means of minimizing the risk is to ensure that the relationship is crafted on the broadest terms, nominally by area of activity or broad research topic. As the focus narrows, the risk for inappropriate or unacceptable political influence increases markedly. While legislators must often make very focused decisions (especially regarding budget issues), they, like most citizens, are ultimately concerned with the long-term success of the state and its citizens. Fundamental research can certainly play an important role in informing short-term decisions that effect long-term goals.

In summary, I believe that we have not done a good job of making university experts and their research available to the legislature. That failure has been to the detriment of both groups. Serious consideration should be given to creating mechanisms that bridge this divide. While that process must include discussion among all parties, the universities should take the lead in this effort.