

Teaching and Scholarly Pursuits: The Policy Sciences at UF Sanford Berg (February 2008)

I do not have a comprehensive vision of how universities can engage policy-makers. Clearly, academics seek to increase the likelihood that political leaders will develop and implement policies that are internally consistent and science-based. Yet each of us only sees a part of our “multi-versity”, resulting in (potentially) narrow perspectives. My own scholarly research and academic teaching span a number of fields, while still drawing upon the core principles of economics. My work has focused on public policy, drawing upon insights from a number of disciplines. Given my emphasis on policy, I have made some major commitments to outreach—translating my technical research and analytical frameworks into learning modules and presentations that can be utilized by practitioners. I find that I learn much from these other communities and I attempt to bring ideas back into my research and classroom activities.

Policy Sciences on Campus: Universities can establish initiatives that help link policy-makers to fundamental social and environmental issues. The journal *Policy Sciences* describes the field as “integrating knowledge and practice to advance human dignity.” In fact, the Policy Sciences cover a wide range of disciplines across a number of colleges and schools at the University of Florida, including, but not limited to, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the College of Engineering, the Warrington College of Business, the College of Medicine, and the Levin School of Law. These fields address issues affecting our quality of life and the sustainability of institutional arrangements. Such issues include organizational governance and performance, natural resource management, and science and technology policy. Important policy issues are addressed implicitly throughout the campus and university extension programs; however, some disciplines focus more explicitly on how social concerns might be examined using fact-based techniques in a methodologically consistent manner.

This university has a wide variety of new initiatives, including the Water Institute, the Institute for Sustainable Energy, the Graham Center, and a focus on globalization. The latter emphasis is partly to make our students less insular by exposing them to regional studies, foreign languages, study abroad, and other programs. The international perspective is also important for researchers, since excellent opportunities for collaboration are emerging from new groups around the world. For example, citizens are concerned about the performance of health and educational systems and the unexpected (generally, unintended) consequences of human activities on our shared environment. Such concerns require that faculty at world class universities be capable of analyzing problems and developing conceptual frameworks that are capable of improving our well-being.

The Policy Sciences draw upon many fields, including the social sciences—anthropology, demography, economics, geography, history, international relations, jurisprudence, political science, psychology, sociology, and statistics. These fields provide analytic tools for examining how people, organizations, and societies identify problems, process information, analyze alternative courses of action, and resolve policy issues. Successful policies will reflect citizen values and recognize all relevant external constraints. The Policy Sciences provide frameworks for evaluating organizational and public policy options; the fields improve

our understanding of individual decision-processes and social choices. In addition, specialists in these fields quantify the extent to which we reach our policy objectives.

These fields draw upon the Life and Physical Sciences to characterize the fundamental constraints related to health, technologies, and the environment. Different academic departments bring different perspectives to multifaceted problems; all shed light on strategies that have worked (or failed) in the past—helping policy-makers understand the full implications of alternative policies affecting educational and health outcomes, energy and the environment, and economic and social development. Scholars and analysts from these fields (often operating in interdisciplinary teams) identify concepts and comprehensive frameworks useful for policy makers; these decision-makers address issues that affect our lives and our national and global security. Furthermore, the fields build upon experiences around the world, since no important issue is ever fully resolved. The lessons learned can be applied to poor and wealthy nations alike. Universities serve as catalysts for bringing together researchers and educators—to explore ideas and to create (or deepen) collaborative activities.

Moving from Proposals to Funded Projects: Sophisticated modeling is essential if we are to establish strong science-based policy. The Physical and Life Scientists can identify past trends, establish baselines, and facilitate analyses of alternative scenarios, including risk assessments. The social sciences can examine citizen tolerance for risk, help identify social priorities, and evaluate the implications of different policy options. Of course, citizens and their elected representatives need to prioritize their objectives, since the differential impacts of alternative policies must be evaluated in terms of our personal and social values.

As statistician George P. E. Box observed, “All models are wrong—but some models are useful.” Important policy decisions are made on the basis of incomplete information: yet university researchers provide frameworks for capturing complexity, understanding patterns, and predicting outcomes. First, scholars must face the issue of how accurate our models must be before they are useful to decision-makers. Then they must communicate the results of research to colleagues and to policy-makers. The newly created UF Water Institute illustrates the benefits of linking different disciplines in the search for new policy options. Engineers look to innovative technologies for solutions to water problems. Similarly, hydrologists provide important data on the impacts of water usage and wetlands on water levels and flows within watersheds. A political scientist might focus on issues of power, legitimacy, social cohesion, and the roles of different stakeholder groups. An economist might examine the benefits and costs of alternative scenarios, incorporating non-monetary impacts into the analysis. So we need to draw upon the assistance of specialists in many disciplines to wrestle with long term policy issues: issues that can be managed, even if they cannot be solved. Graduate students and advanced undergraduates can contribute to such initiatives by linking up with research teams and gaining an appreciation for how scholars can translate lessons learned into language that can be understood by policy-makers.

Faculty experience, coupled with rigorous academic achievement, allows the University of Florida to provide the citizens of the state and nation with better tools for addressing issues. The university can also serve as a neutral forum for bringing together stakeholder groups—to learn from one another. For example, the initiatives associated with the new Graham Center will

both serve as catalysts for research and policy discussions, just as the Askew Institute currently facilitates dialogue within the state. However, policy-makers are ultimately the ones who will process citizen concerns reflected in votes and public opinion polls. With the development of democratic institutions worldwide, addressing emerging issues take on even greater importance, from both a pedagogical and public policy standpoint.

Students seek core courses and electives that include the historical context of policy issues and lessons from the past. The faculty student ratio is one indicator of our ability to deliver on our commitment to address health, education, energy, environmental, and other policy concerns. At present, the ratio falls far short of peer institutions. To be recognized as a great public university, the University of Florida must educate its students to be thoughtful citizens and generate ideas for resolving issues that are not yet on our collective radar screen, but are sure to challenge us in the future.

Concluding Observations: The University of Florida already has valuable initiatives that bring scholars together from a number of fields. We cannot be the best in the world in everything, but we do need to be the “best” in some things. In this era of reduced state funding for higher education, we need to bring together thinkers and doers who can help devise better strategies for advancing research and education on this campus. I am particularly interested in seeing how academia can improve the design, selection, implementation, and evaluation of public policy. Such a focus would reduce the barriers to collaboration at what is too often a multi-versity. I try to have my research agenda and teaching experiences contribute to enhancing a policy thrust, contributing to our mission as the state’s flagship “uni-versity”.