

The Insecurity of Higher Ed Research

by *Doug Lederman*

VANCOUVER, B.C. -- Academics are often characterized (and caricatured) as pompous, confident that they are the smartest people in the room and eager to prove it. But arrogance and insecurity are sometimes flip sides of one coin, and the professoriate has seen a rash lately of scholars expressing dismay at their perceived marginalization -- sociologists awaiting calls from the Obama administration, for instance, and political scientists reiterating calls for more grounding for their discipline in “the real world”.

When it comes to a field with an inferiority complex, few have it over scholars who study higher education. They, like many of their colleagues in the social sciences, yearn for more attention from and influence with policy makers, as was the subject of numerous discussions at last week's meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education here.

But higher ed researchers also feel as if they get short shrift from other scholars within the academy, several of them argued at a panel called “The Trouble With Higher Ed Research” at the ASHE meeting on Friday. Lisa Wolf-Wendel, a professor of higher education at the University of Kansas, said she was stunned when she went on the job market and an interviewer, impressed, asked her why she had sought a Ph.D. in higher education. “His implication was that I should have gotten a degree in a *real* discipline”, she said.

The tricky part about Friday’s discussion about the field’s status is that those commenting had greatly varying perceptions of how they perceived the problem, and therefore about what might be done to fix it. Those most worried about how others in the academy viewed the study of higher education argued that the field had “become too specialized, too insular, and too focused on higher education per se, instead of looking to social sciences or to other colleagues” for inspiration and ideas, as Patricia McDonough, an education professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, put it.

She argued for scholarship that is “more rigorous and better grounded in theory”, in response to criticism that too much of the research produced by scholars in the field is applied and “soft”, as described by the University of Iowa’s Christopher C. Morphew.

But J. Douglas Toma, associate professor at the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia, argued that scholars in the field should embrace its applied nature and focus even more on issues that the many practitioners who come through higher education programs will need, such as management and strategy. Because they focus relatively little on these areas, Toma said, higher education policy makers have increasingly glommed onto the work of economists, “who often have almost no sense of how higher education works.... They delve into our area here, but may not have the passion that we do, or the depth of understanding that comes from fixating on this for decades”.

The problem may stem less from the type of scholarship higher ed researchers are pursuing than the topics they choose to study, Wolf-Wendel said at one point in the discussion, specifically citing the fact that even as 18- to 24-year-olds have become a distinct minority of students in higher education, “the bulk of research we do continues to be about those students” (Similarly, the ASHE agenda was surprisingly skimpy on sessions about and studies of community colleges, compared to research on more elite institutions.)

Scott Thomas, a professor of education at Claremont Graduate University, acknowledged that there was some “danger” for higher education researchers in the fact that they are charged with studying the enterprise in which they work. But he also challenged the idea -- inherent in the session's disparaging title -- that scholars in the field aren't doing relevant and significant studies.

“We have a disbelief ourselves about the quality of our own work, a little bit of a crisis of our own confidence”, Thomas said, urging his colleagues to develop “specialized knowledge” that can’t be matched by scholars from other disciplines who dabble in the groves of higher education now and then.

A Sampling of Studies

The irony of all the self-deprecation coursing through last week’s meeting (and previous meetings of the association) is that the conference agenda was filled with sessions and presentations that were both relevant and interesting. As at any conference, the quality varied greatly, and some of the topics -- especially those conceived by graduate students eager to carve out previously unexplored terrain -- were drawn too narrowly to be of broad appeal.

But following are just a couple of the studies that caught *Inside Higher Ed*’s attention over the meeting’s several days, in addition to those we wrote about earlier and another that is relevant to other news on our site today, about the release of this year’s version of the National Survey of Student Engagement.)

Colleges' Response to Budget Crisis. To the suggestion that higher ed scholars aren’t studying timely topics, Georgia’s Toma was among those presenting evidence to the contrary. In a study conducted with Beth-Anne Schuelke Leech, Toma tapped into a unique database of August 2009 proposals from the 35 University System of Georgia institutions about how they planned to cut their budgets by 4-8 percent in 2010. Their goal: to see whether the institutions were taking strategic approaches to cutting their budgets, and whether colleges took differing approaches based on their institution types and stated missions.

On balance, the researchers found little evidence that institutions, at least so far, were cutting their budgets in strategic ways that reflected a willingness to “re-examine their aspirations or strategic plans”. Most dealt with cutbacks in state funds through traditional means -- furloughs, benefit reductions, eliminated positions, travel reductions and the like. And most were reducing their staffs not through strategic “right sizing” based on which programs are more and less effective, but through methods, like leaving vacant positions unfilled, that result in “cutting based on convenience” The downturn is also, in general, filling the institutions’ faculties more and more with part time instructors, the study found.

But research and other institutions that are focused more on prestige were more likely to continue building facilities (especially dorms and other buildings tied to student recruitment) than were other Georgia public colleges, the researchers concluded.

“We set out to ask whether the budget crisis will cause institutions to ask questions about the aspirational race that most of them are in” toward greater selectivity of students and expansive programs, Toma said. “If there is an opportunity for significant change, we’re not seeing it yet. It looks like they’re just muddling through on the same path”.

Cross-Border Public Education. Much attention has been paid to the explosion of colleges that are offering education at a distance, essentially wiping away the state and other boundaries that have been barriers for students but provided regulatory clarity for state officials.

But at the ASHE meeting Friday, Jason Lane, Kevin Kinser and Daniel J. Knox of the State University of New York at Albany presented data about their work examining the quiet spread of public universities that have established on-ground campuses in other states.

The study, which focused on the extent to which states are regulating both the importing and exporting of higher education, found evidence of at least 60 public colleges that have at least one physical presence in another state, and revealed that all but four states have public colleges from another state operating within their borders. Not surprisingly, the researchers conclude that institutional interests, rather than the public policy considerations of either the importing or exporting states, are driving the expansion.