



## BETWEEN FORUMS

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### Improving the Use of Higher Education Research

Increased concern is being voiced that higher education research has only a limited impact on teaching or the management of institutions. In the U.S. Congress and in various education sections of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, there is the feeling that it is an ineffective use of tax dollars to fund higher education research, because the results of this research will not be used. There is some truth to this perception because researchers have failed to: (1) consider the needs of the ultimate research consumer; (2) be concerned with effective communication of their findings; and (3) develop compatible methodologies.

#### CONSUMERS OF RESEARCH

There are three important areas to consider when examining the consumers of research: (1) Who are they? (2) What are their backgrounds? (3) What are their needs?

Generally, most research is reported as if it were going to be read and used only by other researchers. As a result, these reports are full of jargon, statistical analysis, and caveat statements. The research findings are also often presented without reference to the conditions that precipitated the study in the first place. In reality, the ones who have the greatest need for research are not researchers, but administrators, faculty members, and state and federal policymakers. Unlike most people working at the secondary-elementary level, most people concerned with higher education are not graduates of the schools of education. They come primarily from the humanities and sciences.

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They are trained to be scholars in their disciplines. In general they are ignorant of the education journals, are at best uncomfortable with and at worst hostile to the inexactness of social science research, but still need not only to discover pertinent facts but also to solve problems or improve practices. Because most administrative decisions are based on both factual and political considerations, they are concerned as much with the policy implications of research as they are with the general findings.

The research consumer needs to be able to apply research to a particular type of institution. The diversity of institutions that is so special to American higher education creates problems in applying research findings from one institution to another. The solution is either to identify research that has been conducted at an institution(s) of like characteristics or to replicate existing research. The former is dependent on good communication of research, the latter on understandable methodology.

#### **COMMUNICATION OF RESEARCH**

The first problem in using research is to identify what has been done. Much can be learned from others' failures as from their successes. Unfortunately, all too often institutions are reluctant to release research that does not make them appear in the best light. The consequence of this "If-the-news-is-bad-don't-tell-anyone" syndrome is that many institutions have needlessly duplicated others' mistakes.

Another reason for not communicating research findings is a mistaken belief that the problem being examined is so idiosyncratic that no one else would be interested in the findings. As a consequence, the research is reported only internally, and no effort is made to let others know about it. But this failure to communicate may be not only the fault of the researchers; it also may be the result of not having enough time to develop a formal report or of the study not being of sufficient appeal to research journals.

Often the failure to effectively communicate research findings is caused by not being able to identify potentially important research sources quickly and efficiently. The normal method of reporting—individually produced reports, journal articles, and books—presupposes that the consumer continually reviews this literature. The fact is that most of these consumers are not trained and/or do not have the time to constantly keep abreast of the literature. What is required is a mechanism that will allow quick identification of research findings when they are needed. While such computerized information systems such as

ERIC have greatly improved this situation, there is still no current way of identifying research that has been conducted but not formally reported.

When research is formally reported, it often has limited impact because of the style of the report. Because researchers most often write for the benefit of other researchers, their manner of reporting tends to be esoteric. Great attention is given to reviewing the methodology, anticipating the various threats to internal and external validity, developing sophisticated statistical analyses, and discussing the findings only within the constraints of the research design. Although this is the way researchers are trained to handle their data, it often confuses the unsophisticated consumer.

The length of research reports is another reason why the findings are not used. Most decision-makers do not have the time to review all the background material that usually precedes the findings. They need to know what was studied and what were the results; background and methodological information is of secondary interest. While this may be offensive to the researcher, it is a fact of life. It is an irony that although too much emphasis on reporting methodology may be dysfunctional in encouraging decision-makers to use the research findings, details of research methodology are vitally important for future studies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Much of the research concerning higher education deals with questions such as: do different teaching methods produce increases in learning? Does student aid promote equal educational opportunity? How do the graduates of small liberal arts colleges differ from the graduates of large state universities at graduation and 20 years after graduation? For this research to be useful, it must involve students and institutions of like characteristics and be conducted over a period of time. Longitudinal studies are not always possible, and often research is limited to a single institution. When this is the case, it is desirable to be able to replicate a research study. In many instances several short-term, single-institution studies can provide the same information as a multi-institution, longitudinal study.

To replicate a study, it is necessary to use the same research design. This is not as easy as it sounds because of the variety of conditions affecting research studies. What is needed is greater standardization of terms and greater uniformity of research design. For this to be accomplished, there must be greater awareness of research conducted in similar cases.

**ANNUAL INVENTORY OF RESEARCH ON HIGHER EDUCATION**

There are obvious solutions to these hindrances to the use of higher education research. One solution would be to train or require researchers, as part of any funding, to produce two final reports: one that would be directed to fellow researchers, the second to decision-makers. Decision-makers could take the person-to-person approach by contacting the researchers directly. By using researchers as consultants, the problems of communication present in complex, statistical research reports could be avoided.

On the methodological side, researchers should be encouraged to stop trying new research designs and to replicate studies that seem to have merit but need greater examination. As this is done, there will be an increased ability to generalize the results to a greater number of institutions.

Researchers also should be encouraged to make every effort possible to see that their research is made available to others, regardless of how negative the findings.

There is a common element to all these solutions: better communication, defined as developing the means for people to locate quickly the research that has been and is being conducted. One answer is to create a publication that will answer such questions as: What are the common areas of study? Where are the gaps? Who is conducting this research and where? What are the most useful methodologies?

The Association for Institutional Research, in cooperation with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, is working to develop such a publication. With the initial title of *An Annual Inventory of Research on Higher Education*, it is envisioned that this publication, over the course of a year, would catalogue all research on higher education now being conducted in the United States. This listing would publicize basic information on the type of research being done, methodology used, findings, publications available, and names of the principle investigators.

It is hoped that as more and more people start to use the *Inventory*, the publication will become a major reference tool in the development and use of research on higher education, thereby making use of research to improve higher education an ordinary event.

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