

# More on Gap-Bridging

- [The Skeptics](#)

January 27, 2011

Michael Mosser, the author of the lead article in [the \*Perspectives on Politics\* symposium on a scholar-practitioner gap](#) that I highlighted last month, writes in to say he thinks I partly mischaracterized his argument:

One major point I wanted to get out that I think was missed in your excerpting of the article and the responses was that it's an *alleged* disconnect, and that universities who fail to reward practitioners with academic perks (like tenure, or even professorships) are doing themselves a disservice. I'm totally on board with the idea that the policy elite in Washington are narcissistic and self-serving. In fact, my former students at SAMS would say you and I are in 'violent agreement' about that.

But I think the academic world is no less narcissistic and arguably just as self-serving. So for academics to dismiss out of hand people with policy experience because they are somehow 'tainted' by Washington is ultimately a self-defeating strategy. That, by the way, was the whole point of the Minerva section of the essay, and actually was Ron Krebs' biggest problem with my essay, not so much the part you quoted in the blog.

In the end, though, it was a good experience and a generally fair take on the symposium, and I appreciate the bump.

To my eye, this raises two questions: First, does/should policy work carry with it the taint in the academy that Mosser suggests? Second, is the gap real or alleged?

On the first question, Mosser mentions his work at Fort Leavenworth's School of Advanced Military Studies and he "distinctly remember[s] attempting to connect with traditional academics around the country who felt that because I was being paid by the US Government (and worse, the DoD), that the work I was doing was tainted." Mosser suggests that he was advised that his work at SAMS could damage his professional aspirations.

It is probably true that academics are very wary of scholars paid by the government to help them implement policies, particularly wars with which most academics disagree. But it doesn't strike me that this concern is entirely misplaced. Rare indeed is the money that doesn't affect one's thinking at all. Being paid by and working with people socializes a person, and socialization powerfully influences people. Probably the academy is more wary of people who get paid by DOD than it is of people who get paid by and socialized into the usual suspects of foundations, RAND, et cetera. But to my mind there's good reason to believe that funding and socialization can orient a scholar's thinking in a particular direction—no matter where it comes from. I think that's what academics are concerned about, although I'm happy to be proven wrong on that.

On the question of whether the gap is real or alleged, as I tried to suggest in the previous blog post, academics and Beltway policy mavens generally have enduring, deep, and very real disagreements about *policy*. I [highlighted one such incident last year](#), when, in a post on academics and policy people on Dan Drezner's blog, Steven Metz of the US Army War College wrote in the comments section that:

I really believe the key is for academics to learn how to express themselves in a policy relevant way rather than expecting policymakers to work through academic style analysis and writing. Heck, ***I remember participating in a workshop early in the Bush administration that brought together the elite of security studies professors. The stated purpose was to develop policy relevant analysis. But all I heard over two days was that the Bush administration needed to jettison its worldview and adopt the one advocated by the speaker.*** (emphasis mine)

Thus, when government employees call on academics to contribute in “policy-relevant” ways, they often mean that they want the academics to help them to implement policies they’ve already decided to undertake. (This is the role that think tanks mostly play today. In 1985, Mac Destler, Leslie Gelb and Anthony Lake wrote that the AEI was founded on the knowledge that “Washingtonians were not great readers,” but simply “wanted facts and arguments to buttress their political predilections.”) I am reminded also of Rory Stewart’s characterization of his interactions with policymakers:

It’s like they’re coming in and saying to you, ‘I’m going to drive my car off a cliff. Should I or should I not wear a seatbelt?’ And you say, ‘I don’t think you should drive your car off the cliff.’ And they say, ‘No, no, that bit’s already been decided – the question is whether to wear a seatbelt.’ And you say, ‘Well, you might as well wear a seatbelt.’ And then they say, ‘We’ve consulted with policy expert Rory Stewart and he says...’

By contrast, when academics are asked to be “policy-relevant,” they often want to explain how they think policy can be improved—up to and including change. And hey—that’s relevant! As Ron Krebs mentioned in the symposium, “the comparative advantage of the scholar lies at the level of strategy, in bringing historical or theoretical perspective to bear, in reflection rather than action, at the level of the forest and not the trees.” Most academics just aren’t willing to serve in the “you might as well wear a seatbelt” role that policy folks want them to.

So I think Mosser raises important questions about the politics of the academy, but I think that the gap is all too real. And for my part, I mostly side with the academy.