



Summary of Meeting of University Provosts*
Held at American University,
June 10, 2016

Premise:

Throughout its twelve-year history, Bridging the Gap (www.bridgingthegaproject.org) has directed most of its energies to a bottom-up approach to effecting change in political science and international relations by supporting and training PhD students and faculty through its signature New Era Foreign Policy Conference and International Policy Summer Institute. Hundreds of young scholars have participated in these programs and learned how to develop innovative, policy-relevant research agendas and to translate their academic expertise to contribute to public and policy debates.

As we have built this network of scholars and practitioners, we realized that our natural allies in this endeavor to connect research and policy are university leaders – presidents and provosts – who are under tremendous pressure from alumni, students, parents, donors, and government to demonstrate the value proposition of their universities. We invited provosts from a range of institutions and were delighted that a terrific group from American, Denver, DePaul, Duke, George Washington, Howard, Penn, Syracuse, Tufts, UNC Central, Wake Forest, William & Mary, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison joined us for a day-long conference to discuss how universities can support public and policy engagement.

Objectives:

A growing challenge universities face is the need to more directly and consistently address major global challenges – from economic inequalities to climate change to nuclear nonproliferation – through policy-relevant scholarship and public engagement. By bringing together university provosts, this meeting sought to discover new ideas and opportunities to help universities better support their substantive experts in engaging with the policy community and the broader public.

The goals included:

1. Working to define the obstacles university leadership face when trying to promote public/policy engagement by faculty.

*Principal funding for this and other Bridging the Gap Project activities is provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

2. Identifying best practices by analyzing models at universities that have proven both successful and unsuccessful in mobilizing substantive experts to impact policy.
3. Engaging the government and foundation community to better understand their interests and goals.

Structure of the Meeting:

We opened with a discussion amongst the provosts kicked off by four provosts (American University, University of Denver, Duke University, and University of Pennsylvania), who had been asked in advance to discuss one initiative they had undertaken and associated challenges and opportunities. They opened with remarks on promoting high impact research (American University), promoting community-based research (University of Denver), hiring “policy navigators” for the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions (Duke University), and creating Perry World House (University of Pennsylvania) to foster a hub for the various campus spokes. (More on these below.)

Over lunch, we discussed the view from the Foundations. Moderated by Stephen Del Rosso of the Carnegie Corporation, we heard from Alexandra Toma, Executive Director of the Peace and Security Funders Group, Stephen Rickard, Director of the Washington Office of the Open Society Foundations and William Ruger, Vice President of Research and Policy at the Charles Koch Institute. Although each noted the value foundations place on academic research, there was a consensus view that universities have retreated too much into an ivory tower.

We followed that conversation with a view from Government, featuring Congressman John Sarbanes (D-MD) and James Shelton, former Deputy Secretary of Education, now head of education efforts at the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. Each noted that while academic research is occasionally useful to policymakers, individuals on Capitol Hill or the Executive Branch usually feel they can get more useful information or expertise from other sources. On the Hill, in particular, the tendency is to seek out information from lobbying groups rather than academics, which is not healthy. One area that academics could provide much added value is in evaluating government-funded programs for impact.

The closing discussion with the provosts regarding next steps revealed tremendous interest in continuing the discussion in some form, possibly at future professional meetings, as well as tremendous concern about how universities are viewed by individuals working at the foundations or in government.

Summary of the Discussions:

1) The University as a Driver of Impact

These provosts understand that deep scholarly work by faculty is paramount but they also believe that universities need to strengthen their ability to enhance the impact of research. Ideas included:

- i) Encouraging faculty to ask large research questions. More research in the hard sciences than in the social sciences seems to be driven by large questions.

Collaboration across disciplines is important in this respect since many large questions can only be answered with expertise from different disciplines.

- ii) Strengthening university communications teams in order to identify stakeholders, help to translate work, and target outreach. In this regard, universities can learn from think-tanks. University communications offices should work with faculty to identify and reach out to the target audience throughout the project cycle, not simply post-publication, in order to heighten impact of research. American University has established a pilot program to provide communications support to a select number of faculty in order to help them reach external audiences with their research.
- iii) Promoting community engagement that involves scholarly research. While community engagement is a very valuable goal in itself, it can be most effectively integrated into the scholarly life of a university when it results in peer-reviewed publications. The University of Denver provides funding to a Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning on campus whose success stems in part from its leadership by a full professor who is a leader in her academic field. Highlighting and honoring community-engaged scholarship, encouraging faculty to see it as an avenue toward scholarly publications, and making sure it counts toward tenure and promotion are important means of encouraging faculty to engage in it.
- iv) Fostering “policy navigators” – individuals who can provide administrative and other forms of ‘legwork’ to promote cooperation and coordination between the policy world and academia. We should accept that faculty excel primarily at research and bring into centers and institutes individuals who can help mobilize them and connect them with the policy community. The Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke University, for example, helps provide decision makers with timely, effective and economically practical solutions to the world’s critical environmental challenges; responds to questions from the public sector; and provides “just in time” information to legislators. The Institute is led by research staffers who bring faculty in for discussions relevant to their research and expertise (but doesn’t depend on sustained faculty engagement for success). A more general question raised by this impressive model is how to create such a center – particularly one run by staff who are not ladder-rank faculty – while keeping the center deeply connected to the broader university.
- v) Creating a physical hub on campus with staffing to interface with the policy community and broader public such as Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania. Perry World House is designed to be a University-wide hub for international activities that brings rigorous scholarly inquiry to bear on pressing 21st century global issues; facilitates innovative, policy-relevant collaboration among Penn’s scholars; and fosters a globally minded university community. Such a hub would appear to be particularly valuable for a university like Penn that does not have its own international affairs school, but it could also potentially enhance the public engagement and policy relevance of universities with such schools too.

Provosts saw numerous challenges. As one put it in the discussion of community engagement, “We feel like we are doing God’s work, but God doesn’t grant tenure.” One of our participants suggested the need for “rapid response funds” to promote work responding to critical emerging challenges such as the Zika virus. Another attendee noted that it is hard to bring people together on a campus when their inclination is to scatter.

Provosts did view hiring practitioners as both an opportunity and a challenge. There was concern that some high-level practitioners believe they are coming to a university to ‘retire into the job’ and come with unrealistic expectations about the (lack of) workload. But there was also concern about the tendency of academics to be condescending and even hostile to practitioners, and thus creating an environment of mutual respect is important.

2) University Culture and Obstacles to Promoting Public and Policy Engagement

We had an extended discussion of the value of faculty members having a “year away” to work in the government, non-profit or private sectors. There are many disincentives — explicit and implicit — to taking leave for a year to do policy work. Provosts recognize that for junior faculty, taking a year away is in some disciplines strongly discouraged at the departmental level, and therefore it is important that those who take advantage of these opportunities be allowed to stop their tenure clock during their year away gaining valuable practical experience related to their field of study. Time in the public sector enhances academics’ understanding of the realities, limitations, and culture of the policy process. Just to get things ‘right’ in scholarly work, it may be essential that scholars spend time within or very close to the institutions they are studying.

Provosts also expressed concern about the external review process; evaluators have a huge impact on tenure and promotion and are more difficult to influence than faculty within the institution. Putting language in the request for the review that specifically requests looking at public engagement and policy relevance may help. Provosts requested assistance with metrics: A reviewer may be able to look at a paper published in a top tier peer-reviewed journal and have a quick proxy measure of whether the work is high-quality but policy work does not have the same standard in many cases. Measuring impact is critical for university appointment, promotion and tenure committees. But as one put it, “you wouldn’t tell Yo Yo Ma he isn’t credentialed to teach a master class.” There was also concern that faculty may blame a denial of tenure on the fact that they have produced work that is policy relevant. This may not be the case, but the perception is damaging. The provosts argued that department chairs will often tell faculty not to do policy-relevant work because “the provost won’t look favorably on it,” but that these chairs are simply using the provost’s name in ways that are simply not true.

Next steps:

Hearing from individuals from the foundation and government worlds left the provosts very concerned about the views that their universities are not engaged with critical local, national and international challenges. The Provosts felt that conversations among multiple parties would be valuable, and they asked if we could bring together individuals from media, nonprofits, foundations, and government with university leaders. We discussed the value of having older foundations, newer foundations and university leadership engage in *new* problem identification

and develop research programs. They also suggested we engage with provosts through the annual AAU meeting as well as meetings of particular groupings such as the ACC, Big Ten, Colonial and Patriot League to help foster this shared agenda.

It may also be worth devoting part of a subsequent discussion to the relationship between universities and private sector research labs. It's important to recognize that good social science (as well as good natural science) is not done solely inside of universities. Increasingly, the relevant skills and efforts are found in corporate research labs, mimicking what has long been true of the National Labs' relationship to scholarship in physics for example. Can universities engage more fully and constructively with these private sector research operations?

The bottom line is that our hunch that provosts are natural allies in our efforts to bridge the gap is absolutely correct. There is a real opportunity for us to work with university leaders across the country to further the effort at connecting research and policy and promoting broader public engagement.