

DIRECTED RESEARCH CENTERS AND PUBLIC PROBLEMS

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February 1969

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This paper contends that it is not enough for research centers to develop analytic mechanisms and to conduct policy research into community and environmental problems. Immediate attention must be paid to learning how to bring about institutional and process changes requisite to implementing the mechanisms and deciding on policy options.

The panel was entitled "Think Tanks and Public Problems." However, I prefer the generic name "directed research centers" to the term "think tank" for reasons that I hope will become apparent.

Directed research centers can be defined in terms of their products. They focus on applied, organized research to answer questions of societal importance. The primary products take the form of documents intended to communicate research findings.

The institutional characteristics of directed research centers further define them. Their formal organization is usually loosely structured; ad hoc teams being assigned by project. Typically, they are nonprofit; they do not develop a proprietary interest in their products. They are removed from operating responsibilities. Finally, they aspire to an interdisciplinary approach to problem solving.

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This paper was prepared for delivery as a brief introduction to a panel discussion entitled "Think Tanks and Public Problems" given at the California Statewide Conference of the American Society for Public Administration, February 6-8, 1969, Berkeley, California. The audience comprised public administrators from all levels of general purpose government and special districts as well as students and faculty.

CHANGING ROLES IN LOCAL PROBLEMS

During the past five years or so, there has been a fundamental change in the role of directed research centers with respect to nationwide problems at the state and local level. It is this changing role and some research priorities that I wish to elaborate briefly.

For the past twenty years, most support for directed research has come from the federal government and from private philanthropic organizations. It is not surprising, therefore, that the national level has been the focus of concern. With few exceptions, the relationship of the centers to state and local problems has been what might be called "spill out and trickle down." There are numerous examples. PPBS was developed initially for the Department of Defense. It has trickled down to the state and local level. The same is true of benefit cost analysis, sophisticated micro-economic techniques of analysis, systems analysis, and certain of the advances in computer software.

A second relationship might be called "occasional prescription." Hearle and Mason's celebrated book, A Data Processing System for State and Local Government, was written at and published by The RAND Corporation. Such examples have been all too infrequent in the industry.

The emerging role is fundamentally different from the past role. It is more akin to the relationship developed between the directed research centers and the federal government over the past twenty years. The new role is one of direct, penetrating involvement. The centers are now involved in firsthand learning of nationwide problems where primary operating responsibility resides with state and local government. There have been numerous examples of this involvement in California in the past few years. There are increasing examples in other states. RAND, for example, is deeply involved in New York City, the State of Arkansas, and in other jurisdictions. The strategy first applied at the national level is now being applied at the local level.

A RESEARCH AGENDA

The accelerating involvement by the directed research centers in societal problems at the state and local level suggests that immediate attention be paid to developing an agenda of research.

Like everyone else, directed research centers are aware of and concerned with pressing substantive problems of the environment and of the individual in society. There is no need to elaborate these items, for they are well known. Briefly, however, they require that applied problem solving be focused on our neanderthal urban and suburban environments and the increasingly poisoned natural ecology. Concerning the individual in society, this generation must deal affirmatively and soon with the problems generated by the changing life styles of post-industrial society, changing societal values, and the disparities between those who have and those who do not have.

To date, the directed research centers have concentrated on developing analytical tools and answers to substantive problems. It is important that this work continue, particularly in the critical areas just mentioned. Perhaps the most critical research agendum, however, has just begun to be broached. We must shift a substantial portion of our research energies to devising and institutionalizing more adequate public processes and institutions, particularly for anticipating public policy making.

Unless we meet the imperative need to enhance our collective ability to deal with high priority problems, the elaborate solutions and the new tools will remain impotent. Unless public institutions develop the capacity to adapt to and to anticipate the accelerating rate of social, ecological, and technical change, public policy will continue to lag tragically behind the forces that are shaping which of our possible futures will come to pass. Our freedom of choice will continue to be diminished commensurately as we are increasingly the victims of our technology rather than its masters.

The institutional inertia occurs at and among all levels of government. Within any one jurisdiction, the hardened arteries of bureaucracy preclude us from mounting effective programs that cut across traditional departmental lines. In metropolitan areas, I find it patently absurd that regional councils of government are the most effective means we have been able to devise for attempting to make critical decisions of regional importance. Among levels of government, it is a testimony to our social incompetence that we've been unable to

muster sufficient resources to even begin to rebuild the worst parts of our cities.

We must consider the possible need to redefine what is private and what is public. It will be necessary to devise workable processes for using the mechanisms designed to bring improved information about wider ranges of alternative policy options and their consequences to bear on public decisionmaking. We will have to consider processes for altering the agenda of legislatures. It may be necessary to radically alter or to eliminate whole sets of public institutions and to replace them with new types of organizations. In short, it is imperative to devise means for institutionalizing a cognizance that static approaches are no longer appropriate. Change is the constant.

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I've outlined what I believe to be a critical area of concern for directed research centers. The centers must broaden the range of perceived policy choices. They must help to develop institutions capable of affirmative leadership and flexible response.

Directed research centers have much to offer to state and local government: interdisciplinary teams of skilled analysts; a reservoir of expertise in both substantive problems and analytical methods; a communications network that tunes them in to relevant research being done elsewhere; and, they have acquired the extensive technical infrastructure required to conduct research in complex problems.

I am not at all certain, however, that with all their research capacity the centers will be an effective force for helping to accelerate institutional change at the state and local level. My uncertainties can be expressed in three questions.

First, can the two types of institutions, government and directed research centers, stand the initial shock of involvement with one another? Some of the first encounters have been painful to both parties. Often, local governments are disillusioned with the absence of quick and easy answers. They are not always tolerant of the heresy that is implicitly required in creating alternative policies. Directed

researchers, on the other hand, frequently are disillusioned and dismayed when they find resistance to their recommendations and techniques.

Second, can directed research centers manage to be both innovative and practical without becoming irrelevant or prosaic? Can they avoid falling victim to the disease of the patient? Since they themselves are organizations, directed research centers can grow for the sake of growth and become staid and mediocre. How can they continue to infuse themselves with new blood and new ideas?

Third, in what ways can the directed research centers help public institutions to become more dynamic than they are today? How much of the change must come from within public institutions themselves? What kinds of relationships can be developed to attain optimal strain and change?

I commend these three questions to the panel at hand, to the audience, and to the directed research centers themselves for consideration and for debate.

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