WHEN IT comes to the role of research in shaping public policy and debate, one might reasonably argue that this is the best of times. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), with its frequent mention of evidence-based decision making, has underscored the role that objective knowledge should play in a democratic society. The Institute of Education Sciences, through its grant policies, promotion of randomized field trials, and its What Works Clearinghouse, has provided detailed road maps of what greater reliance on strong research design might mean. Research findings and debates get deep coverage in such outlets as Education Week and instant coverage in the blogosphere. And advocacy groups appear anxious to enlist researchers as spokespersons and draw on social science evidence to add legitimacy to their causes.

Paradoxically, it might just as well be argued that this is the worst of times. Among policy makers and many scholars, educational research has a reputation of being amateurish, unscientific, and generally beside the point. Exacerbating matters are high-profile tussles between prominent researchers publicly disparaging one another’s methods and interpretations. Researchers disagree; that is neither new nor a matter of concern. But the portrayal of the debates in the public arena reinforces cynicism with regard to the independence and potential contribution of good scientific techniques.
In this article, I highlight five broad structural changes that are potentially changing the demand for research, the availability and type of data, and the way research enters the public realm as part of ongoing policy and political debates.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND THE DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH

Think tanks and advocacy organizations regularly disseminate their own studies or summarize the work of others electronically. As an indication of the scale of this activity, Andrew Rotherham’s blog, Eduwonk, gets about 1,200 to 1,400 visitors every day and includes 97 links to other education blogs, 12 links to sites providing education news and analysis, and 30 links to policy and political blogs that cover education along with other issues.

In an earlier era, the normal cycle for policy research included submission to a peer-reviewed journal, double-blind review, and requirements for revision (nine months or more from acceptance to publication). There was generally a reluctance to cite research until it had been vetted through these slower and more meticulous processes.

New technologies for dissemination have compressed the time between initial results and public release. “The cycle of news is evolving,” reports Howie Schaffer, who oversees the Public Education Network’s Weekly News-Blast. He continues:

The weeklies like TIME don’t try to break news anymore; they try to have relevant analysis. The daily papers try not to get burned breaking news that they know may evolve significantly throughout the day. The e-newsletters try to beat the bloggers to the story . . . so everyone is trying to keep their content fresh.

Researchers often feel pressure to get their results out there “now,” partly out of fear of being scooped and partly out of a belief that the window of opportunity to influence policy debates is open for shorter and shorter periods of time.

When speed becomes critical, normal processes for refining, checking, and simply deliberating about evidence can be short-circuited. This is especially the case in politically charged arenas in which groups with tactical interests in advancing or blocking specific policy actions can co-opt the process. Researchers may acknowledge the limitations of their own data and design, but those caveats are often the first things to be stripped from the message as others take it up. In practice, research that aligns with ideological cleavages is more likely to be pushed into the public realm, thus blurring the distinction between advocacy and unbiased analysis.

THE ACADEMY AS CONTEXT

At most universities, there has been a separation between the education faculty and the more discipline-based arts and sciences faculty. The growing importance of education in national politics and the emergence of market-based school reforms have attracted more economics and political science researchers to address questions of education policy. But while the reconnection of the academic disciplines offers educational research greater prestige, focus, and rigor, it is accompanied by less attention to the nitty-gritty of schooling. It is still unclear whether a meaningful dialogue will open between the recent discipline-based visitors to education and their counterparts within the mainstream educational research community.

Reengagement of the discipline-based scholars, in the meantime, may contribute to the already dysfunctional fragmentation of academic and professional journals in educational research. Within the sciences and medicine and within the social science disciplines, there are typically one or two journals thought to be reliable arbiters of importance and quality. While several educational research journals are quite good, there is no comparable flagship publication. Discipline-based researchers anchored in the academy already have strong incentives to seek to publish first in the major journals recognized by members of their departments; the absence of a recognized peak journal in educational research exacerbates that tendency.

PRIVATIZATION: GROWTH OF THE CORPORATE SECTOR IN K-12 EDUCATION

In the era of NCLB, private providers of management, education, curriculum, professional development, and testing are becoming more important but are also under increased pressure to demonstrate that their products are research-based. The large firms require significant in-house research capacity, but for various reasons — including the occasional need for the greater credibility obtained with research by independent organizations — they find it appropriate to contract with private research firms, universities, or university-based scholars acting independently from their home institutions.

Growing privatization within the education sector increases the demand for research but at the possible
cost of introducing new constraints on researchers with regard to what they can study, how they can access data, and how freely they can participate in public dialogue. Private firms have legitimate concerns about proprietary information, as well as a sharp institutional self-interest in ensuring that evaluations of their activities result in favorable reports.

**SOURCES OF RESEARCH FUNDING**

Sources of funding have their own organizational priorities and may require a tradeoff in independence. As a result, shifts in the funding environment can affect the kinds of research being done, the extent to which researchers or others are determining the research agenda and methodologies, and the ways in which research results are carried into the public arena.

Governmental support for research in the social sciences generally, and in education policy in particular, has been at a much lower level than spending on such things as health, life sciences, military technologies, and so on. For every $100 spent on research, less than $2.25 goes to the social sciences and less than $0.41 goes to research within the U.S. Department of Education.

Not only does the federal government spend relatively little on educational research, but what it does spend tends to be more tightly defined and controlled. Researchers consider basic research to be the foundation on which knowledge is built, but members of Congress often find it too far removed from the measurable payoffs in constituents’ lives that they need to point to in justifying public investment. Basic research in education competes poorly with applied research (intended to determine the means by which a recognized and specific need may be met) and spending for what might be referred to as the “four Ds”: development, dissemination, data, and direct services.

In 2005, basic research made up only 3.5% of the total R&D budget for the U.S. Department of Education. In addition to being more likely to emphasize applied research and development, federal funding for research in education is more likely to take the form of contracts than grants.

The deemphasis on basic research and on investigator-initiated grants narrows the discretion left in the hands of researchers, reduces the role of peer review and other formal protections for scholarly autonomy, makes the funding somewhat less attractive to university-based researchers, gives non-university-based researchers some competitive advantages, and increases the ability of program administrators to shape studies and influence the dissemination of findings.

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With the limits and constraints of federal funding, educational researchers have been increasingly turning to private foundations for support. Most foundations do not give money designated for K-12 education, and among those that do, research is not a particularly high priority. Nonetheless, foundation funding can be quite influential in certain niches. In interviews with researchers active in the area of vouchers, charters, and school choice, I found that foundations were about three times as important as the federal government as a source of support for their work.

The way foundations and researchers come together differs from the formalized and regulated procedures involved with federal funding; it is more common that they seek each other out based on style, trust, and compatibility of mission. Foundations in general are less concerned with peer review and sophisticated research designs and more concerned with helping to shape and disseminate findings that accord with their organizational missions.

THE DYNAMICS OF FEDERALISM

Historically, K-12 education has been among the most localized of government functions. It is too soon to declare localism a thing of the past — its political roots are strong and resilient — but it is equally clear to declare localism a thing of the past — its political roots are strong and resilient. Nonetheless, foundation funding can be quite influential in certain niches. In interviews with researchers active in the area of vouchers, charters, and school choice, I found that foundations were about three times as important as the federal government as a source of support for their work.

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3. E-mail communication, 21 February 2007.