

Infusion of Innovation: Catalyzing Policy Change Through Research

Nathan Daun-Barnett
Thomas E. Perorazio

University of Michigan
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Research on the policy process can shed light on the functionality of government and its associated institutions (McLendon 2003), and help us to influence the course of policy decisions. The current study is an attempt to consider one specific case of policy innovation that may illuminate the complexities sometimes overlooked in the current literature on the topic. The study is a single comprehensive case study of a nine-month commission convened by Governor Jennifer Granholm in the state of Michigan to double the number of state residents with credentials of value and to more closely align higher education with economic growth in the state. Specifically, this study attempts to complement the work of McLendon, Heller, & Young (2005) on the diffusion of innovation in higher education by examining the creation of education policy recommendations while utilizing a statewide education commission as a catalyzing agent for innovation. McLendon, Heller, and Young (2005) make an important contribution to our understanding of diffusion in the context of higher education as they expand upon the earlier work of Hearn and Griswold (1994). Their analysis and tested hypotheses provide us with a useful framework for describing the state context for the statewide commission in Michigan.

Two emergent theoretical frameworks for studying policy creation serve as the foundation for this study. The first is that of policy diffusion (Walker 1969; Gray 1973). Walker (1969) shifted the conversation regarding the emulation of policy among states from one of internal state fiscal and political conditions to one of regional competition, where states adopted innovations either to gain a competitive advantage or to avoid losing ground. His work suggested that larger, wealthier states in regions serve as bellwethers for innovation and others adopt similar policies as well. This perspective views policy innovation and formation as an outcome or consequence of certain conditions. While a number of researchers have considered

diffusion of innovation in terms of geographic proximity, legislative control, salience of the policy issue, and the role of governance structures (Balla 2001; Grossback, Nicholson-Crotty et al. 2004), few have considered how the process of learning from other states occurs and how that learning translates into policy recommendations and initiatives.

The second is Kingdon's adaptation of the garbage can model of organizational change, conceptualized as streams of problems, policies, and politics that are brought together in windows of opportunity (Kingdon, 1995). Kingdon conceives of

“...three process streams flowing through the system – streams of problems, policies, and politics. They are largely independent of one another, and each develops according to its own dynamics and rules. But at some critical junctures the three streams are joined, and the greatest policy changes grow out of that coupling of problems, policies, and solutions (p. 19)”.

According to Kingdon's conceptualization of agenda setting vis-à-vis policy streams, problem recognition is essential and a case study allows for the consideration of how the problem was cast in the state of Michigan, necessitating some sort of formal response.

Taking into account the reality that states learn from one another in deciding which policies to adopt (Hays 1996; Mooney 2001; Boehmke and Witmer 2004), we propose a new concept as a complementary process, integrating diffusion and policy streams—*policy infusion*. The notion of infusion recognizes a level of intentionality whereby actors in a state context seek out solutions to complex policy problems. Rather than examining the spread of one policy across multiple states over time, this study will look at one state and the adoption of multiple policies. We will show how one state learned from others about various policy options, brought them into the agenda process, and used that information in the consideration of policy

alternatives. We accept that diffusion of innovation occurs across states and we also recognize the existence of a complex political process. What we contribute to the conversation is recognition of a process by which state innovation finds its way into the policy stream during a specific type of opportunity window – a commission convened by the state executive. At another level, we are describing the important role research and education researchers can play in a political process.

Diffusion via Infusion

According to the diffusion literature, there are two ways in which policy innovations spread among states. Vertical policy diffusion occurs when the national government influences the policies enacted at the state level, either through mandates and fiscal incentives or sanctions, or by sending clear signals to the states regarding its preferences for future action (Allen, Pettus et al. 2004). In the context of education, the example of school accountability in Texas and its adoption as federal policy through No Child Left Behind provides a poignant example. Texas chose a particular approach to education that was unique in some way from other states. It had documented some measure of success in terms of improving student outcomes and it happened to be the home of incoming president prior to its adoption. The Texas approach became a model for the federal legislation and as such proved to be a useful laboratory for state level innovation. Absent federal involvement, national communication networks may advance policy innovations (Mintrom and Vergari 1998). These can be groups of individual policy entrepreneurs that promote innovations within circles of influence, such as interstate professional associations. Membership in these associations, particularly by persons of importance, can be instrumental in the spread of policy ideas (Balla 2001).

Regional—or horizontal—diffusion can occur when states consider and adopt policy positions similar to those in nearby states. This transmission of policy ideas has been studied using social learning theory, in which states draw on the experiences of other states when contemplating policy adoption (Gray 1973; Boehmke and Witmer 2004). States may engage in ‘satisficing’ to catch up to other states or simplify the process of policy adoption, rather than engaging in systematic analysis of competing policy options. A contrasting viewpoint is that diffusion occurs through economic competition as states vie for business and tax revenues by implementing tax, expenditure, and public policies that attract citizens (Tiebout 1956; Boehmke and Witmer 2004). The work of McLendon, Heller, and Young (2005) and Hearn and Griswold (1994) examine horizontal diffusion as an outcome. Both vertical and horizontal diffusion models focus on the policy adoption without a full consideration of how states actually learned from one another and adapted policies accordingly. While economic competition is useful in understanding the behaviors of states, in the context of the commission, the policy outcomes are best understood in terms of what Michigan learned.

Although social learning is often understood as a process by which states look to their neighbors for policy ideas to consider, in reality it is a complex process. Thus, social learning “is not merely emulation. Rather learning is a process through which information is acquired, interpreted, and acted upon” (Mooney 2001, p. 120). The evolution and reinvention of policies, and the extent to which such policies become more comprehensive over time, suggests that states do not simply follow the path-breaking states or policy networks (Hays 1996; Mooney, 2001). Recent discussions lament that much research has focused on matters of policy adoption based on the intrinsic merits of particular policies, but has not greatly enhanced our understanding of how states learn from one another. Instead the emphasis has been on diffusion patterns

(Grossback, Nicholson-Crotty et al. 2004). McLendon et al (2005) discuss how recent scholarship concluded that much of the research on the diffusion of innovation focuses upon explaining variance in innovation patterns rather than illuminating processes by which ideas spread among states. Scholarly focus on contiguity, policy networks, and individual entrepreneurial agents sheds light on pathways of information, but does not lend insight into the content of information that states consider when weighing policy options, or how the nature of that content affects decision making (Grossback, Nicholson-Crotty et al. 2004). The concept of infusion allows us to fill this critical gap in our understanding of policy innovation.

A Model of Policy Infusion

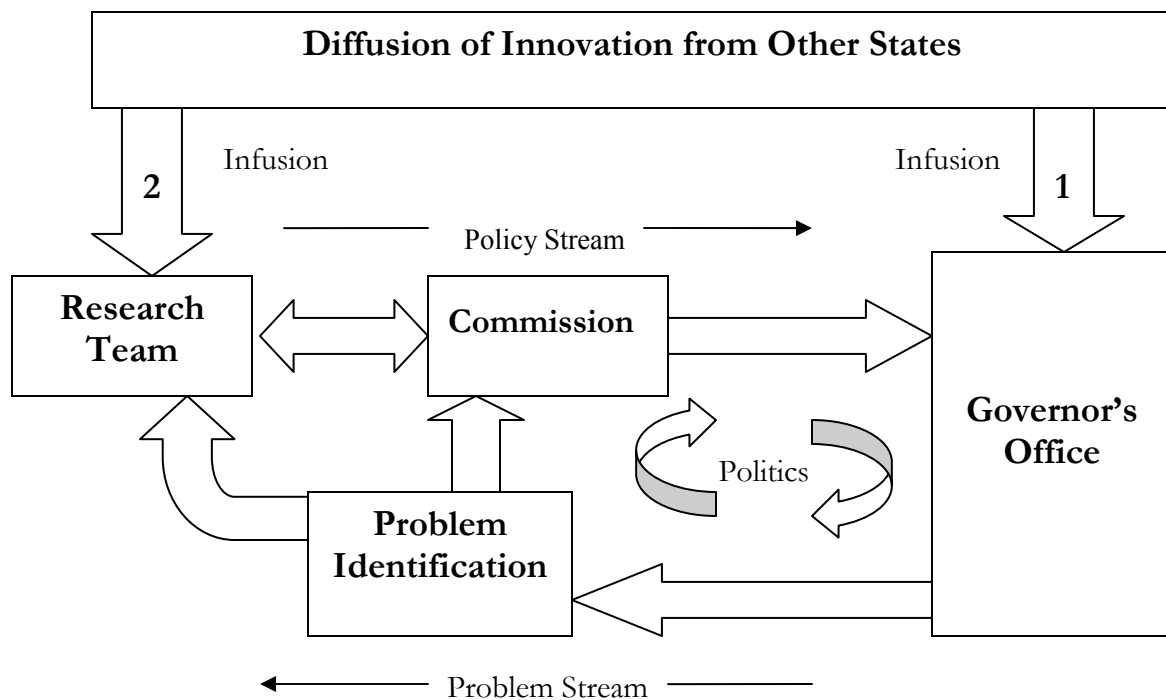
This individual case study of the Governor's commission provides a unique opportunity to explore one way by which diffusion results in operational policy formation. However, what we propose is that the process of infusion translated diffused knowledge into a stream of policy options addressing identified problems and informing statewide politics. In Kingdon's terms, the commission convened by the governor provided the window of opportunity, the Governor defined the initial set of problems, and the politics exist in a variety of contexts but are most salient between the members of coalition groups within the commission and the Governor's office. Figure 1 provides a framework for integrating the concept of diffusion with policy streams by way of infusion.

According to the model, infusion occurs in two places. The first is in the Governor's office as they begin to define the problem. The Governor's office utilized both an understanding of statewide factors and an understanding of how these issues were being addressed in other states around the country. The second point of infusion occurs in the context of the work of the research team. Once the problems were initially defined, the research team searched out the

promising practices from other states to inform the thinking and eventual recommendations of the commission. This role of infusion is critical in the process because, given the scope of the problem definition (spanning preparation for college, participation and attendance in college, completion of a degree, and the economic benefits of higher education) and the timeframe within which to work (six months from the first commission meeting to the submission of the final report) it would have been difficult for the commissioners to access the same range of options and alternatives.

Figure 1.

Infusion and the Integration of Diffusion and the Concept of Policy Streams



Methods

Policy formation has been studied using stage models in which circumstances are classified as constituting evidence of a particular stage. Critical events are theorized as indicators of movement through the stages (Anderson, Brady, Bullock, & Stewart, 1984; Palumbo, 1988). However, research is also needed on “higher education’s interaction with macro-political institutions of state government... including governors, legislatures, interests groups, or executive branch agencies in the higher education arena” (McLendon, 2003, p. 171). In this research, we demonstrate how the infusion of innovation occurred within the intersection of higher education, the Governor’s office and these various interest groups. Although the case study approach can be limited in important ways because it addresses policy in only one domain (education) in one state context (Michigan) during one period of time (2004-05), single-case studies can be appropriate when a problem has not yet been clearly defined or when the state’s circumstances are unusual compared to other states (McLendon, 2003). The use of a commission is one policy tool that is seldom explored in the literature and thus not well understood as a catalyst for policy formation.

It should be acknowledged that the authors of this paper were members of a team of policy researchers charged with the role of providing research data on a range of questions posed throughout the commissions work. As such, we are both intimately familiar with the process and yet in part responsible for the outcomes achieved by the commission. So while our perspective is unique and valuable with respect to how policy innovation occurs in real time, our work can not be viewed as objective and unbiased because we did not merely observe the process; we played a role in the formulation of that process.

Data for this study include a review of primary documents, field observations, and interviews of key organizers and members of the commission. We also consider intrastate factors unique to Michigan at this time. Particular attention is paid to the role of research in the infusion process and the considerable role played by external constituent groups. The context section under results provides insights into the existing state situation at the time of the commission, utilizing McLendon, Heller, and Young's work as a way to focus attention on issues recognized as significant to the diffusion of innovation among states. The interviews are conducted with three individuals most directly responsible for the formation and execution of the statewide commission: (1) the Governor's advisor on education and communication, (2) the director of policy and research, and (3) the primary consultant responsible for the process of moving the commission from agenda formation to policy recommendation. Finally, we discuss several recommendations made by the commission including those endorsed by the Governor. Central to this entire discussion is the process by which the commission learned from other state policy efforts, which at times is consistent with prior theories, but is equally subjective and idiosyncratic. We will argue that the infusion of innovation occurred throughout the policy formation process.

Results

The Context

McLendon, Heller, and Young (2005) articulate eight testable hypotheses or likely conditions for facilitating diffusion of innovations across academic, financial, and accountability domains in higher education: (1) size and wealth of state, (2) centralized postsecondary governance structure, (3) professionalism of legislature, (4) power ascribed to the executive, (5) high levels of inter-party competition, (6) proximity of statewide elections, (7) single party

control of legislature, and (8) influence of regional neighbors in the context of interstate competition. Given that the current study is a single case study of a particular window of opportunity in a single state, it is not possible to test these hypotheses directly, but they provide a useful method for characterizing the state at the time the commission was convened. It might be useful to think of this set of factors as influencing the formation of the window of opportunity necessary in Kingdon's conceptualization of the policy formation process. Our interviews suggest that while these conditions may or may not have influenced whether the window opened, they certainly influenced what form that window took. Stated differently, the challenges facing higher education could have been addressed any number of ways, but the commission was chosen precisely because of the existing political climate in the state of Michigan at the time.

Size and Wealth of the State. Michigan is the third largest state of the 12 in the Midwest (as defined by the Midwest Higher Education Compact) with slightly more than 10 million residents. Illinois is the largest at more than 12 million (fifth largest in the nation in 2000). Another way to think about population in the context of higher education is the anticipated growth rate. Higheredinfo.org (2006) shows that the Midwest is going to fall behind the rest of the nation in terms of the college age population. Minnesota is expected to show the highest rate of growth in the region, which is well below the national expected rate of growth from 2000-2025 (9.8% v. 14.1%), where Michigan projects a decline in the same period of more than 5%. Wealth is a more complicated way to think about states and as one might imagine, the "wealthiest" states in terms of total revenues is highly correlated with population size, making Illinois among the wealthiest and Michigan near the top. However, another way to think about wealth is in the context of the percentage of families living below poverty. On this measure, the Midwest does comparatively well. Minnesota is first in the region (second in the nation) with

5.1% living below poverty and Michigan ranks 7th in the region at 7.4%. To put this in context, the national average is near 9.2%. Perhaps more relevant to Michigan at the time of the commission was the economic health of the state relative to prior years. Michigan, like nearly every state in the nation, was hit hard in the early 2000s by budget deficits and higher-than-average unemployment. Unlike much of the nation, Michigan remained on a negative trend while much of the nation had begun the recovery process. Much of Michigan's challenge could be attributed to the decline of the automotive industry. Perhaps more than any other manufacturing sector, the auto industry in Michigan has faced enormous challenges that have resulted in lay offs, buy-outs, and restructuring that have displaced a large number of employees and has produced a ripple effect for the entire automotive supply chain.

The 2000 census numbers identified above then, do not paint an accurate picture of the situation at the time of the convening of the commission. Contrary to the hypothesis that innovation occurs among the wealthiest states, for Michigan, innovation was a matter of necessity. Higher education is not the only domain within which innovation is occurring but it is one of the most prominent currently. The state had cut higher education budgets by more than 10% over two years, as one of a few discretionary budget lines, and there was growing discontent among colleges and universities as a result.

Centralized Coordination of Higher Education. Michigan is a unique exception in American higher education when it comes to governance. It is arguably the least coordinated system of any state in the nation where the four-year public institutions enjoy constitutionally guaranteed autonomy and even the community colleges are only loosely affiliated through volunteer membership in the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA). Higher

education is accountable to the legislature for state appropriations, but the formulas for funding and the pressures from the institutions leave little discretion for much legislative control.

Professionalism, Interparty Competition, and Party Control of the Legislature. The Michigan legislature would be characterized as relatively high in terms of professionalism. They are paid a full 12-month salary, tend to be highly educated, and are commonly career politicians. However, in 2002 term limits were passed and it has changed the nature of professionalism in the Michigan legislature. The limit is two terms and this has a particular impact on committee work. Where one of the benefits of a professional legislature is the development of content expertise, committee turnover is now much higher. It may be the case then, that those attracted to service in Michigan are attracted by the professionalism of the position, they are not given adequate time to develop Michigan-specific knowledge of higher education and its needs in the state. The current legislature is Republican controlled in both houses where the governor is Democratic. At the time of the commission, the Governor was in the middle of a four year term (year 2 in 2004). So while she is currently up for re-election, she was not at the time of the commission. Equally, during that election cycle there was no change in control of either house in the legislature. It might be said that there is a high level of interparty competition in terms of the numbers of democrats and republicans serving, but the Republican party has been in control of the legislature for at least 8 years, suggesting less competition.

Regional Diffusion. This is difficult to assess for two reasons. First, the commission was less an innovation as it was a window of opportunity to identify and support innovation. Second, this is a single state case study which does not lend itself to this sort of comparative analysis. We will have a great deal more to say about diffusion when we discuss the role of research in the process of infusion. At this point it is sufficient to point out that while two states in the region

had previously held commissions (Missouri and Ohio) according to our interviews, those were not factors in the decision to utilize the commission as a tool. Equally, the state had held several commissions related to higher education (the most recent of which was 1984), but again, there was no evidence suggesting that had any bearing on the decision to convene a commission in this scenario.

Findings

We suggest that infusion was critical in the formation and definition of the problem statement and in the evolution of the policy solution stream. Further, we posit that the process of infusion introduced necessary information into the policy solution stream so the Governor's commission could respond effectively to the streams of policy problems.

Conceptually, we suggest that infusion occurred at two points in the commission process. The first was at inception of the commission and resulted from the way the agenda was defined by the Governor's office and her education policy advisors. The second point of infusion we describe occurs throughout the work of the commission via the research incorporated into its deliberations. This is the central focus of the paper. It is important however, to understand how the agenda for the commission was crafted because it has implications for the infusion of research throughout the six months of commission work. In the case of Michigan, the agenda began with a statement of the problem.

Infusion Point 1: Crafting the Agenda

Kingdon (1994) defines the agenda as "the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials, and people outside the government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention to at any given time (p. 3)". The problem stream most salient to the commission was primarily framed in terms of economic development.

Michigan had formerly been a thriving manufacturing economy but that was in the process of weaning itself from the automotive industry and had not yet transitioned into a knowledge based economy. Governor Jennifer Granholm made the case that the failure of Michigan to transition was a result of our sub-par levels of academic attainment. The problem however was also a matter of public and political will. When the governor took office, she toured the state and found that higher education was one of the lowest priorities in the eyes of the voters. After three consecutive budget cuts, totaling effectively 12% of state appropriations to higher education, and considerable national attention regarding affirmative action and access to Michigan colleges, the Governor decided it was time to elevate higher education on the state agenda. Subsequent to the National Governor's Association meeting that year, the governor chose to set the brazen goal of doubling the number of college graduates within the next ten years while more clearly linking higher education to economic growth.

Here we see how policy streams at the national level can be infused into the agenda of a state. The National Governor's Association (NGA) had recently convened a meeting of Governors to discuss higher education; that meeting resulted in two things. The first was the eventual publication of the Jobs for the Future book, *Double the Numbers*. The second was a series of memos from NGA providing some guidance on the salient issues identified in other states. We describe this as the first critical point of infusion where the Governor's leadership team drew upon the most visible research available nationally to structure the work. Our interviewees described how these ideas were known to them when the policy priorities were being discussed.

The governor's office decided, after the problem was framed and a goal was announced, that while a number of methods existed to address the problem, a statewide commission was the

right vehicle for change. In recent years, both Missouri and Ohio had convened state wide commissions regarding higher education; however our interviews revealed this had little influence on the decision. Rather, a commission was decided upon for two reasons. The first was an issue of capability. All three interviewees talked about a prior experience convening a land use commission and cited that as a successful political tool. Perhaps more important was the issue of legitimacy, which is predicated upon the very conditions articulated by McLendon, Heller, and Young. This is a critical point that cannot be overemphasized because it brings clarity to the goals of commission organizers and it may provide a lens through which to view the outcomes of the commission.

Kingdon discusses the importance of external interest groups to the political process and while the National Center for Public Policy In Higher Education was not consulted specifically on the work of the commission, their national report card provided an important operating framework, with two important exceptions. The *Measuring Up* report grades states on six broad areas related to higher education: preparation, participation, affordability, completion, learning, and benefits. However, a decision was made to drop affordability and learning. As it was described, the former was too politically charged given the recent cuts to state appropriations that it could undermine the commissions' ability to think beyond the need for more funding. The latter in their opinion was more a data quality issue. No one spoke of the implications for accountability when they addressed the elimination of learning from the structure. The product of these deliberations was four sub-committees, or workgroups: Preparation, Participation, Completion, and Economic Benefits.

Duration was the next critical decision, and this point speaks to the importance of acting upon a particular political stream. Politically, there were several issues on the agenda that could

not be held back for a year or 18 months as may be preferable in some cases. Instead, they found in talking with prospective commissioners, that any process longer than 9 months would fail to capitalize on the existing window of opportunity. It was decided then, that the entire duration of the commission from its announcement in March of 2004 would be nine months, with the final set of recommendations due to the Governor in December. The director of policy and research discussed the duration of the commission in the context of buying time for the implementation of ideas to address higher education. A commission would effectively suggest that action was being taken when implementation would not happen for another year.

While these initial goals were established by the Governor's team, there was a sensitive political issue that had to be negotiated before the commission's work could begin in earnest. The single most consistent criticism of the commission throughout the early stages of the work was that an agenda was already set and that the outcomes were a foregone conclusion. We explored this issue with our interviewees and found that the answer is a bit more complicated. First, it was true that a structure for the work of the commission was imposed upon the process. This structure is the result of our first point of infusion. The leaders recognized the importance of organizing the work in a way that allowed commissioners to be clear on their role and to enter the discussion and exploration processes more quickly. The Governor's advisor and the policy director both recognized the *Measuring Up* report as the structure they adapted.

The setting of the agenda does not end with the *Measuring Up* structure. Our interviews suggest that there were 4-5 items on the Governor's "wish list" and at the first meeting the research team was given a list of 15-20 areas for inquiry, divided into the four work group areas. About a third of the items on the list were already under way and the remainder was a result of brainstorming among the leadership team. Two examples illustrate what was already on the

agenda. The first was a hotly contested issue in the state at the time: replacement of the criteria referenced high school tests (the Michigan Educational Assessment Program) with the ACT. The legislature was already poised to act on this measure, but they agreed to delay their process until the commission could weigh in on the issue. The commission did not change the general outcome because the MEAP was replaced, but it did represent a bipartisan cooperative arrangement that built will across the political aisle. The end result was a bit more nuanced than the original debates suggested. In the press coverage of this debate prior to the commission, the issue was simply whether to replace the MEAP with the ACT. The end result was actually a hybrid of the ACT combined with a supplement of other content areas, consistent with several other states, including Illinois. The preparation workgroup of the commission had an opportunity to hear from ACT and to weigh the existing alternatives; it appears that the final outcome was influenced by their deliberations.

The second was the Michigan Merit Scholarship. The Governor had already proposed an alternative to the existing \$2500 one-time award to qualified high school graduates. However, even with a separate sub-committee of the participation workgroup, the scholarship program was not championed in a way that led to any meaningful movement on this issue. It remains something the governor's office is committed to reforming, but it has not been addressed in the republican legislature. In the context of the commission and given the structure adopted by the leadership team, this issue did not fit well on the agenda. It is also interesting to note that because the issue was only addressed in the sub-committee, the research team was not asked to explore alternative scholarship programs.

Legitimacy. The agenda was also shaped by the commissioners through their representation of stakeholder groups statewide. The leadership team all reported separately that

an essential goal for the commission was a process widely accepted as legitimate by the two political parties and by the commissioners themselves. This is important because while the governor's office had crafted a "wish list" for the commissioners to consider, the governor's advisors report they were more invested in the perception of the process. The preparation group provides a useful illustration. According to the coordinator of process and logistics, the chair of the preparation workgroup was openly skeptical, suggesting that they were likely a rubber stamp for a predetermined set of recommendations. However, two developments reshaped her perception. The first was that she saw that the briefs and the recommendations began to reflect the deliberations of the group suggesting that their work was shaping the agenda. The second was the evolution of an issue the group thought was a non-starter: the Michigan Core Curriculum for high school graduation. During the second meeting of the preparation workgroup, the idea of adopting state requirements for high school graduation was brought to the attention of the group. It was on the longer list of items from the leadership team, but it was not one of the 4-5 "wish list" items. A republican senator in the workgroup stated rather pointedly that the issue had been addressed by the legislature in prior years and it would never even make it to committee. However, over the course of the work groups' subsequent sessions, the recommendation began to gain support and it became one of the first recommendations to be acted upon after the final report was issued. It was this issue for the preparation workgroup that established their work as legitimate to the process of effectuating change in higher education in Michigan.

Membership. In many ways, the membership of the commission is a reflection of the agenda and it also influences the evolution of it. Originally, the commission was slated to include 24 voting members, but after three months of identifying and prioritizing appointments, that number expanded to 41. In Michigan, there is no central coordinating structure within

which to initiate change. Equally, there is no singular voice to speak for the four year public institutions or the community colleges. As a result, it was necessary to invite three public university presidents instead of one. And you could not have fewer than three community college presidents because that would show preference to the four year institutions. The independents had two representatives and quickly, there were eight college presidents instead of three or four. The same is true for independent colleges. Commissioners were selected precisely because they had an investment in the issues being addressed and they represented the key stakeholders around the state. But they also came with their own ideas and suggestions for the direction of the recommendations, which had an impact on the final set of recommendations.

Infusion Point 2: Research Synthesis and Distribution

The second point of infusion reflects the role researchers played in the synthesis and distribution of available research to commissioners. It also provides the clearest link between the diffusion of innovation and Kingdon's policy streams. Among the briefs produced, a number of analyses considered how Michigan compared to other top performing regional and national states in addition to what states have done to improve higher education. The commission research team engaged in the process of infusion by first understanding the nature of education in Michigan, how Michigan performed relative to other states, and what conditions contributed to the challenges facing the state. In many respects, the problems were obvious, when framed in the context of the *Measuring Up* report: high school graduation rates were near 70% meaning a number of students would need to follow alternative pathways to higher education if they were to attend at all; more than 23% of the population had some college but no degree meaning that barriers were in place preventing students from completing a degree; college educated young professionals were leaving the state at higher rates than they were entering, effectively creating a

brain drain for the state; and for those remaining, there were not sufficient opportunities for employment. The commission staff documented these challenges among others, considered the literatures pertinent to those problems and built a strong statement of the set of problems the commission needed to address.

Research played a major role in the commission's understanding of the topics under consideration within the Economic Benefits workgroup. The issues addressed by this group were quite diverse and broad in scope. Perhaps more than any other, this workgroup required a background in the basic facts and figures, a primer on the complex subject matter, and a discussion of policy alternatives. The issues considered by this workgroup included: (1) Commercialization of Research, (2) Attraction/Retention of Talent, (3) Workforce Alignment & Economic Growth, (4) Entrepreneurship Education, and (5) Community Development. These are issues that are not generally well-understood among educators and their complexity made drawing the connection to higher education imperative, since this was not solely an economic development commission.

The research briefs presented explained how, for example, the results obtained from the commercialization of research from states like Wisconsin and North Carolina were produced by long-standing, multifaceted programs that were based in cooperation between the states and their universities. Some commissioners did not understand the non-linear nature of commercialization and what building the capacity in this area entailed. Important points like the impact of venture capital, and how poorly Michigan compared to other states, were not appreciated until that information was presented. Also, having the research team draw connections between issues such as community development, talent retention, and entrepreneurship that related back to higher education policies made a difference in how these topics were considered.

According to the regional diffusion hypothesis, problems might naturally be framed in terms of interstate competition and that was partially true in this case. Innovation in the region was considered, but commissioners were interested in what a number of states were doing beyond the Midwest. According to the regional diffusion hypothesis, bellwether states within the region have an important impact on the role of diffusion. Research suggests that states learn from the innovations of states in close proximity (especially the bellwether state(s) in the region), however we found that this tells only part of the story. In actuality there were four methods by which states were selected for consideration by the commission and what was learned depended upon how the commission understood the problem and who offered potential remedies:

(1) **Proximity** – the commission considered first how contiguous states and regional leaders were addressing challenges in their higher education systems. Ohio had just recently completed a statewide commission the year prior to the one in Michigan and Minnesota was a leading state on a number of metrics included in the Measuring Up report.

(2) **Similarity** – frequently, states within the region face similar problems, however, we found this was not always the case. For example, Michigan is highly decentralized at all levels of education and this is a defining feature in terms of the types of policy decisions made in the state. In this context, Massachusetts and Colorado were more useful models when looking at how similar states actually implemented changes in higher education.

(3) **Propensity** – As Walker suggested in 1969, a number of states tend to exhibit innovative behavior and they tend to be the larger, wealthier states like California, New York and Florida. For example, the day after Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger announced a \$2 Billion fund for stem cell research, the Benefits workgroup discussed the possibility of something similar for alternative and renewable energy sources. The research triangle in North

Carolina is another example frequently discussed because of their success as a magnet for research and knowledge sector jobs.

(4) **Serendipity** – in a number of cases, the commissioners and advisors to the commission, in addition to the research team, were aware of innovations in states that might not have fallen into the other three categories depending upon the issue. The commission staff synthesized the lessons learned from selected states, checked the policy alternatives against the existing literature, and generated a series of briefs for the commissioners to consider.

All four of these conditions were instrumental as researchers identified model innovations for consideration by the commissioners. In all cases, regional leaders on given measures were included for comparison purposes. The same is true for leaders from other regions. In most cases, contiguous states were included and in a number of situations, states like California, Texas, New York, and Florida (bellwether innovators) were referenced because commissioners knew something of the innovations of those states. The fourth condition – serendipity – may be a misnomer. In fact, it may be a proxy for the far reaching influence of national level interest groups. For example, ACT was invited to talk with the commissioners in the preparation workgroup to discuss the feasibility of adopting ACT to replace the MEAP. ACT had already partnered with several states, including Illinois and Oklahoma, and produced case studies of both states for Michigan to consider. Illinois is a regional competitor but Oklahoma is not, yet both were instructive as the commission developed a recommendation regarding the ACT v. MEAP debate.

Achieve, Inc. was another national level interest group that was influential to the work of the commission. Achieve has been a leading advocate for a rigorous high school course of study and they were invited to present their work to the preparation work group. They too, have

partnered with other states around the nation and they were able to suggest model states that may not have otherwise been considered as benchmarks for Michigan. In a few cases, there were clear and well established models for certain innovations that made more influential than even their regional adopters. Consider the recommendation to adopt a lifelong data tracking system. This item was both a “wish list” item and one of the recommendations underway prior to the commission. The Data Quality Campaign has been influential at the national level as has the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on the development of individual unit record data management systems, but the single most influential example was the state of Florida, which has the most established data system in the nation. Ohio (a regional competitor and contiguous state) has developed a system as have other states, but Florida was far more compelling because of its long history.

The Utility of Research

It was clear from the interviews that research was utilized in two important ways during the course of the commission – at the formation of the agenda and during the meeting and workgroup process. The next question one might ask is whether the research was found to be useful. All three members of the leadership team held different sets of complementary and at times overlapping goals for the work of the commission. As discussed earlier, legitimacy was an undercurrent for all involved and for the governor’s office, this was of primary importance. For the director of policy and research, the goal was to craft an agenda comprehensive enough to address the challenges facing the state and operational to the extent that recommendations could be acted upon subsequent to the completion of the commission. The goal for the director of process and logistics was to create a process that engaged commissioners and honestly captured their thoughts and ideas in the reports and recommendations. All three held legitimate goals for

the process but can be assessed in different ways to ascertain the degree to which research was useful.

For the governor's office, a legitimate process with broad based bi-partisan support was essential. With a conservative legislature, a sagging economy, and an election pending in 2 years, the governor's office recognized the need for this process to create opportunities for innovation to take root. The changing perception of a workgroup chair (discussed earlier) is one example of how the process transformed skeptics into believing they had a voice in the process of crafting recommendations. Another example may be useful in order to illustrate how the process changed the perceptions of key members and as such adapted in visible ways to the will of the commissioners. From the very beginning the commission was framed in economic terms. The very title "The commission on higher education and economic growth" articulated the specific emphasis by suggesting an economic problem and a higher education solution. During the first full commission meeting and initial workgroup sessions, commissioners all had an opportunity to share their thoughts and insights in the public forum. Several prominent members of the commission were outwardly vocal about expanding the conversation beyond the economy to the social benefits and deeper than the state level to recognize the unique relationships communities have with higher education. At the end of the day, the Lt. Governor summarized what he heard and suggested a "sea change" to create a transformation of the "culture of education". The thoughts were not yet cogently formed by the delivery of these comments, but it suggested that the economy was only one (albeit important) way to think about the role higher education plays and that others should be considered, particularly in the local community context.

It may be too early to assess the degree to which the recommendations of the commission both reflected the will of the collective commissioners and was suitably tailored to create the conditions for change, but there are some signs to indicate progress on this goal was made. In a recent brief summarizing the progress of the commission one year later, Affolter-Caine and Daun-Barnett (2005) found that nine of 19 recommendations were acted upon in some way, with the ACT/MEAP issue and the high school graduation requirements on the forefront. A number of these recommendations were already underway when the commission began but several were new to the agenda (like the Michigan Core Curriculum). Perhaps of equal importance is the fact that the commission work is still referenced in state policy conversations 18 months after the commission completed its work. In a number of meetings ranging from those hosted by the President's Council for the State Universities of Michigan (PCSUM) to the annual conversations on higher education and workforce development at the Detroit Economic Club to the "Your Child" Campaign spear-headed by the Michigan Education Association (MEA), the recommendations of the commission serve as a starting point for the conversation; an anchor suggesting what these organizations advocate or propose is consistent with the direction of the state. During the interviews, it was clear that even on a few issues that appear to be stagnant, there is movement on the ground. For example, despite the recommendation to create a unit record data management system for higher education, it appears the issue has fallen off the agenda. However, the K-12 system and an evolving labor and employment tracking system have both received support to continue or expand their efforts.

Some might wonder the degree to which research really informed the agenda during the six months of commission work. It was evident that research provided the commission an aura of legitimacy to both the participants and the outside observers. Some of this had to do with the

fact that the research team operated from one of the two major research institutions in the states but it also suggested that the work and recommendations of the commission were data driven. It turns out that the greatest direct link between the research briefs and the commission agenda was the weekly update and processing meeting held among the team leadership. The process and logistics director was responsible for the creation of the large group and work group agendas, the scheduling of meetings, reservations of space, dissemination of materials, and the revision and adaptation of the overall agenda decided upon at these weekly meetings.

Originally, the director of process and logistics expected that in addition to coordinating logistics, he would be responsible for the research as well. During the land use commission his firm was responsible for both aspects of the work and he had some working knowledge and interest in higher education. During the interview he expressed on several occasions how thankful he was that a decision was made to convene a team of researchers and that he was not ultimately responsible for that material. His firm dealt with the editing and publishing of the briefs, but he realized in retrospect that 13 briefs averaging 15-20 pages of text for the four work groups produced during the three key months of August – October would have been far too much work for him and his staff to handle. Additionally, he claimed that on a third of the agenda setting meetings, the entire brief or set of briefs helped to frame the following weeks' meetings and at another third, at least a portion of what had been produced by the research team found its way directly on to the work group agendas. In his estimation, the research was at the very heart of the commission process and that without it, the commission would not likely have been the success he believed it was.

The commission team leaders all concluded that research was an essential component to the eventual success of the commission but for different reasons. Legitimacy may have been an

important political goal, but that alone would not have suggested that the actual research made a meaningful contribution to the eventual outcome of the commission. An actionable agenda may have occurred without any meaningful attention paid to research if the commission were able to establish legitimacy in some other way. But it appears the infusion of research on what states did and how they did it in the context of higher education was essential to the evolution of the agenda in the hands of the firm responsible for the process. It is impossible to say, given the exploratory nature of this study, the extent to which the process may have operated in the absence of a research team. It is likely that a number of promising and innovative strategies may have been introduced by commissioners, the commission leadership team, or certainly from the national interest groups discussed earlier. From that perspective then, it is difficult to evaluate the value added, aside from the perception of those responsible for the outcomes of the commission.

Conclusion and Implications

Utilizing this case study, we have demonstrated how policy infusion introduces policy ideas into the political process. Policies travel across state lines when information is brought into policy discussions through the intentional actions of policymakers to consider alternatives within the context of a particular state. This study illustrates the intersection of policy formation as outcome and the political policy making process. Infusion began with the need to clearly articulate the specific challenges facing Michigan. The problem stream most salient to the commission was primarily framed in terms of economic development. The catalyzing event—the statewide commission—capitalized upon the need to reform higher education while also making the reform part of the Governor’s broader goal of transforming the economy of the state. By focusing on a particular window of opportunity in a single state, we are able to observe how

factors thought to influence the adoption of innovation relate to the actual process of crafting an agenda, crafting a set of strategies, and making recommendations.

Although we identify two pathways of infusion in this process, the paths should not be interpreted as one-time events. Infusion was evident in the processes for problem definition, goal articulation, and policy development, as well as the organization and structuring of the commission's work. The infusion process via the research team is a complex, iterative process of feeding information into the commission, receiving feedback from the commission, clarifying the problem, and looking to other states or policy literatures to begin the process of infusion again. The research team engaged in the process of infusion by first understanding the educational performance of Michigan relative to other states and the conditions contributing to those shortcomings. This involved comparative analysis of data such as graduation rates, educational attainment, net migration, and technology transfer. The commission staff documented these challenges, considered the literatures pertinent to those problems, and built a strong statement of the challenges.

Infusion also allowed for an adaptation of innovation strategies to fit the unique circumstances facing Michigan, consistent with the evolution process of policies in the diffusion literature. Several policies, such as dual enrollment, a student tracking system, and increased commercialization of research were favored by commission organizers from the outset, but the work of the research team grounded their implementation within the parameters of Michigan. Additionally, the process of infusion allowed the commission to address a broad agenda in a relatively short period of time. Given the scope of the problem definition (spanning preparation for and participation in college, degree completion, and the economic benefits of higher

education) and the timeframe within which to work (six months), it would have been difficult for the commissioners to access the same range of options and alternatives.

The current study has implications for our understanding of the infusion of innovation with respect to the regional diffusion hypothesis. McLendon et al found support for the regional diffusion hypothesis in their analyses, suggesting that states with one or more contiguous states adopting a policy are more likely to adopt that policy. Our experience and observation tells us that while this may be true in terms of the likelihood, the actual process of identifying model innovations is more complex than interstate competitive explanations suggest. Clearly, regional competition is one factor, but in the case of the Lt. Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth, it was also framed in terms of global competitiveness. Some may argue this was a rhetorical device to create a sense of urgency regarding higher education, which may be true, but Michigan is unique in that the automotive industries primary competitors are global corporations. It may have mattered less then to the Michigan commission if their policies were in line with regional states because the target was to become globally competitive. Our experience and observations show that proximity played a role in terms of what was illustrated as a best or promising practice, but it was equally important to consider other states with reputations for innovation.

This study also illustrates the important influence of national interest groups and their role in expanding the diffusion pattern more quickly beyond contiguous states. There is an important point to be made regarding the scope of this study however. We were particularly interested in identification of policy alternatives and the development of recommendations as a result. Our experience then tells us that the options presented to the commission extended beyond interstate competition, and suggests the recommendations presented to the Governor

were similarly broad, but is less definitive on what is ultimately adopted. We know for example that the Michigan Core Curriculum is more similar to those adopted more recently in Southern states than any Midwest neighbors and that Florida is the model for Michigan's effort to develop a data management system for higher education, but each case is different. In the end, what is adopted may look very similar to policies in neighboring states, but only time will tell.

Finally, this study has implications for researchers interested in participating in and informing the policy making process. First, the national organizations that make data readily available and easily accessible are making a significant contribution to state policy. The *Measuring Up* report was the template for the work of the commission in Michigan and many of the reports published by the major higher education policy organizations found their way into the briefs prepared for commissioners. The degree to which these organizations can anticipate the challenges facing states and articulate a clear agenda, the more influential they will become. Also, as researchers, we did not necessarily divert the policy solution stream. Rather, we may have been able to serve as a funnel or a filter slowing its pace for the commission and focusing on the most pertinent, timely and available data. The process of infusion then is more a matter of concentrating the policy solution stream via learning and innovation that is more focused than might otherwise be the case.

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