The Review of Higher Education
Spring 2016, Volume 39, No. 3, pp. 319–338
 (ISSN 0162–5748)

Throwing Down the Gauntlet: Ten Ways to Ensure That Higher Education Research Continues to Matter

Laura W. Perna

Imagine what a keynote address at the very first meeting of what has become the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) would have forecast about ASHE in the year 2015. Would the conveners of the first ASHE conference have guessed that:

- The number of ASHE members would grow sevenfold, rising from 300 in 1977 (Kellams, 1977) to more than 2,200 in 2015?
- The conference would no longer be held over two days in March, immediately preceding or following the annual American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) meeting, but instead would be a standalone conference held over four days and with seven pre-conferences?
- The general conference would have not six research paper sessions with 19 papers (as in 1978) but 129 research paper sessions with 352 papers (as in 2015)?

Laura W. Perna is James S. Riepe Professor, Executive Director of the Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD), and Chair-Elect of the Faculty Senate at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research identifies how social structures, educational practices, and public policies promote and limit college access and success, particularly for individuals from lower-income families and racial/ethnic minority groups. Please address inquires to: Laura W. Perna, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, telephone: (215) 746-2522; email: lperna@gse.upenn.edu

Beyond this structural growth, I wonder: Did the founders of ASHE imagine the many substantive advancements in knowledge that would be made by ASHE members over these past 40 years? Where would higher education administration and research be today without Howard Bowen's "revenue theory of costs," Robert Birnbaum's *How Colleges Work*, Vincent Tinto's model of student departure, Michael Olivas' *Latino College Students,* Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades' *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*, Yvonna Lincoln's handbooks on qualitative research, and Bill Tierney's *Organizational Culture and Higher Education*? These are among the many groundbreaking contributions that ASHE members have made to knowledge of higher education over the past 40 years.

Celebrating success is fun. But, celebrations are limited in their long-term impact. As Bill Gates (1996) said, "Success is a lousy teacher. It seduces smart people into thinking they can't lose" (p. 38). Or, as Will Rogers (n.d.) put it, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."

At this 40th annual meeting, let's do more than celebrate ASHE's past. Let's look to the future. In this address I offer ten ways to ensure that higher education research continues to matter.[1]

1. Address important aspects of important problems.
2. Recognize implications of important societal changes.
3. Anticipate emerging issues for higher education policy and practice.[2]
4. Build a sustained program of high-quality research.
5. Engage in comparative research.
6. Capitalize on the strategic advantages of academic research by:
   a. Utilizing high-quality rigorous designs and methods, and
   b. Grounding our research in appropriate theoretical frameworks.
7. Promote the indirect influences of research on policy and practice.
8. Disseminate findings without circumventing peer review.
9. Engage in conversation with policymakers and practitioners.
10. Base advocacy on research, not opinion.

Let's reflect on each of these recommendations.

Address Important Aspects of Important Problems

As signaled by this year's conference theme, I believe that one of the most important problems that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should be addressing is "inequality and higher education."

[1]I numbered these actions to improve readability; the numbers do not reflect levels of priority.

[2]I conflate policy and practice throughout this manuscript. Policy and practice are related but distinct (Lingenfelter, 2016). Policymakers must determine what and how "public resources" are allocated to achieve "public objectives," while practitioners determine how "to deliver service to achieve the goals of the policy" (Lingenfelter, 2016).

Most ASHE members report that their research is somehow related to inequality and higher education. Of the 1,377 proposals submitted for presentation at the 2015 conference, a remarkable 83% (n=1,140) reported relevance to the conference theme. I did not analyze the content of proposals with self-reported connections to the conference theme, but I expect that the authors of these proposals had varying approaches to and understandings of "inequality and higher education." Regardless, the high level of attention to inequality among proposal submitters likely reflects a shared realization that inequality is a current and pervasive political, economic, and social problem in nations across the globe.

Building a body of high-quality research on inequality and higher education is necessary given the complexity of the topic, the relatively narrow slices that can be examined in a single research study, and the utility of studies that use different theoretical perspectives, sources of data, and methodological approaches. Despite numerous research studies, however, the opportunity to enroll in and complete a high-quality higher education program continues to vary based on an individual's family income, race/ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Higher education opportunity and outcomes also vary based on the characteristics of the K-12 schools and higher education institutions that a student attends as well as the neighborhood, state, region, or nation in which an individual lives (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Perna & Finney, 2014).

I am worried that, although much research is being conducted, new studies are not addressing the most important gaps in knowledge about inequality and higher education. Especially necessary is research that informs understanding of how to address the structural and systemic barriers that limit higher education opportunity and outcomes for too many students (Perna, 2006; Perna & Finney, 2014). In her keynote address at this conference, Cheryl Crazy Bull, President and CEO of the American Indian College Fund, described the need for more research that improves understanding of higher education opportunity and outcomes for indigenous peoples. We also need research that answers questions like:

- How can policymakers and practitioners ensure that all students, but especially students who attend under-resourced high schools, are able to move from secondary school to higher education without requiring developmental education?
- Nearly 50 years to the day of the signing of the federal Higher Education Act of 1965, how can policymakers and practitioners ensure that all individuals have the financial resources that are required to pay the rising costs of higher education?
- How can policymakers and practitioners ensure that students who choose a community college as a low-cost entry point into higher education are able to transfer to a four-year degree program and complete a bachelor's degree without loss of academic credit?

RECOGNIZE IMPLICATIONS OF IMPORTANT SOCIETAL CHANGES

While undeniably important, inequality is only one societal issue with implications for higher education. To ensure the future for higher education research, we must also recognize the implications for higher education of other demographic, political, economic, and cultural societal changes.

One critical change is the growing diversity of the U.S. population and populations of nations around the world (WICHE, 2012). An indisputable strength of ASHE is our collective recognition of, and attention to, the diversity of the world in which we live. The research conducted by ASHE members reflects an appropriate, robust valuing of differences in characteristics, experiences, and outcomes of students, faculty, and institutions across and within states and nations. ASHE members like Sylvia Hurtado, Mitchell Chang, Jeffrey Milem, and Liliana Garces have substantially advanced research-based knowledge of the educational benefits of diversity. Other contributions that have changed the discourse on diversity in higher education include Estela Bensimon's Equity Scorecard process for institutional change, Shaun Harper's anti-deficit achievement framework, and Marybeth Gasman's attention to the roles of minority-serving institutions. Established in 1988, ASHE's Council for Ethnic Participation has long helped to advance the careers of ASHE members from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, as well as scholarship on race, equity, and inclusion.

Our individual and collective commitment to understanding diversity is certainly a strength. But, I am concerned that we are not giving sufficient attention to the many other societal changes that also have implications for higher education – including diversity in higher education. Particularly important are other changes in the characteristics of our population, including changes in native language and immigration status. We also need more attention to the implications for higher education of changes in K-12 academic preparation policies, changes in the availability of public resources for financing higher education, and changes in demands for accountability of higher education institutions and outcomes (Perna & Finney, 2014).

ANTICIPATE EMERGING ISSUES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AND PRACTICE

If we are to make contributions into the future, our research needs to be examining the emerging issues facing higher education. I am particularly uneasy about the paucity of research on three topics: academic freedom, tenure, and governance; college outcomes; and new modes of instructional delivery.

Issues pertaining to tenure policies at the University of Wisconsin are continuing to develop (e.g., "Is Wisconsin system chief backtracking on tenure," November 2, 2015, *Inside Higher Ed*). Clearly we need more research-based

knowledge about academic freedom, tenure, and shared governance in the current economic and political context. Among the many questions that our research should be informing are: What are the implications of various government accountability policies in the U.S. and other nations for institutional autonomy and academic freedom? What are the implications of the growth in non-tenure and adjunct faculty for the views and perspectives that are represented through campus governance mechanisms? What are the implications of challenges to academic freedom for teaching, learning, and research? Matthew Hartley, Adrianna Kezar, Gary Rhoades, Amy Metcalfe, and Blanca Torres-Olave are among the scholars who are considering these and related questions.

We also need more research that informs understanding of the outcomes of various postsecondary educational degree and credential programs. Policymakers, practitioners, and journalists are clearly interested in this topic, as indicated by the energy that the Obama Administration and the U.S. Department of Education recently devoted to the College Scorecard. Interest in quantifying "return on investment" is not surprising, given the continuing growth in the sticker price of higher education. But, identifying outcomes is not easy, as such efforts must take into account the diversity of institutions, programs, and students.

ASHE members should be contributing research expertise to inform the many related questions, including: What are the short-term and long-term economic and non-economic costs and benefits that are associated with different programs and credentials? How do the economic and non-economic benefits for individuals and society vary based on student, program, and institutional characteristics? Are there benefits associated with enrolling but not completing an educational program? What are the learning outcomes associated with enrollment in different programs at different institutions?

A third topic that would benefit from research by ASHE members is changing approaches to instructional delivery. As an example, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have recently received a great deal of attention among policymakers and practitioners (Rhoads, 2015). MOOCs in their current form are unlikely to be the "solution" to the college access problem or the higher education finance problem, as some have proclaimed (Perna et al., 2014). But, nations across the globe are looking to MOOCs with these hopes. As higher education researchers, we should be helping to lead higher education forward in its quest to identify effective low-cost approaches to delivering high-quality, accessible higher education (Perna & Ruiz, in press).

These are only a few examples of the important issues facing higher education. Research is needed to inform policymakers and practitioners' understandings of these and other issues and the most effective policies and practices for addressing these issues. Policies and practices should be adopted and implemented based on research knowledge, not rhetoric.

BUILD A SUSTAINED PROGRAM OF HIGH-QUALITY RESEARCH

Like other researchers, higher education researchers must find a balance between addressing immediate problems in higher education and building a body of work that has long-term implications for the field. Although I am disturbed that policymakers and practitioners are moving forward with reforms and innovations without the benefit of research-based knowledge and insights, I am not suggesting that our primary goal should be to conduct research on the "hot topic" of the moment. More important is considering how to construct a sustained program of high-quality research that can evolve and adapt to reflect important demographic, political, economic, and cultural societal changes, anticipate emerging issues in higher education policy and practice, and improve understanding of the implications of these changes for higher education.

Anticipating emerging issues is not without challenge or risk. We minimize the challenges and risks when our attention to these new issues builds on our own, and others', relevant prior work. Higher education researchers have the knowledge and expertise that are crucial to informing policymakers' and practitioners' understandings of the implications of the higher education reforms and innovations that are emerging now, and that will undoubtedly continue to emerge in the years ahead. If we do not contribute research-based knowledge to inform understanding of emerging issues and the implications of these issues for critical dimensions of higher education, who will?

ENGAGE IN COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

I am also concerned that our research remains largely internally focused on the United States and that international issues remain on the margin for most ASHE members. Engaging in comparative research and other approaches that require us to step outside of the perspectives and contexts in which we are embedded helps us to learn more about higher education in our own context. Opportunities to learn about the role of public policy in promoting higher education attainment in Ireland, Hungary, and Kazakhstan have helped me gain new understandings of the forces that contribute to higher education attainment in the United States (e.g., Marcus, 2014; Perna, Orosz, & Jumakulov, 2015).

The questions that we, as higher education researchers, ask in our local and national contexts can be asked across other contexts. Questions with cross-cutting relevance include: Who gets access to what types of opportunities? What are the outcomes for and experiences of different groups of students? Who makes decisions about curricula and pedagogical strategies and with what consequences? Who pays the costs? What are the right mechanisms for ensuring quality and accountability? Understanding variations in the

answers to these shared questions is one fruitful, but underutilized, approach to generating new insights.

Capitalize on the Strategic Advantages of Academic Research

Those of us who are academics should recognize and capitalize on our strategic advantages. Policymakers and practitioners consider the credibility and trustworthiness of information sources, and they tend to perceive academic research as more credible and trustworthy than research that is produced or funded by an organization with a defined agenda (Green, Ottoson, Garcia, & Hiatt, 2009; Perna, 2015b; Rigby, 2005; Scott & Jabbar, 2014; Wong, 2008).

To maximize our strategic advantages, our research must be theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous (Brownston, Royer, Ewing, & McBride, 2006; Economic and Social Research Council, 2013). Some (e.g., Terenzini, 1996) note that "concern with theory and fidelity to a set of methods (whether quantitative or qualitative)" may have worrisome negative consequences, including the tendency of researchers to focus on ever-narrower questions, use "specialized language," and engage only with "like-minded scholars" (p. 7).

Despite these potential downsides, ASHE members have conducted theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous research studies that productively inform policy and practice. For example, scholars like Jim Hearn, Nicholas Hillman, David Tandberg, and Amanda Rutherford have productively advanced understanding of state-sponsored performance funding programs – even when their findings disagree with the preferences of powerful higher education funders – because of the theoretical and methodological rigor of their scholarship.

As Laura Rendón (2000) encouraged in her presidential address, we need to "honor diverse ways of knowing" (p. 9). Multiple theoretical and methodological approaches are certainly essential to generating comprehensive understandings of complex problems facing higher education.

Regardless of research paradigm, the contributions of our work depend on the quality of the theoretical grounding and the rigor of the research design and methods. I am troubled by research that is well-intended but theoretically and/or methodologically weak. Experimental and quasi-experimental designs have tremendous power, given their ability to establish causal relationships. While a growing number of ASHE members are using quasi-experimental methods, only a small number use experimental designs (Cassel, 2015). Experimental and quasi-experimental designs are, however, useful only for a subset of questions and interventions and are not without limitations (Hess, 2008b; Lingenfelter, 2016; May et al., 2013). In particular, the validity of these studies is restricted when they are not grounded in relevant theoretical perspectives. High-quality exploratory work is also necessary,

especially for informing the conceptualization of emerging research problems and underlying processes. But, I worry about the prevalence of descriptive, single-case case studies. Regardless of methodological approach, I also worry about overstatements about policy implications, especially in studies that are based on small and/or non-representative samples and have other important theoretical and/or methodological limitations.

Definitions of methodological rigor have changed over ASHE's past 40 years, and will likely continue to evolve. As individuals and as a collective, we must stay current in our understanding of new data and methods. Emerging sources of data (e.g., "big data," state administrative data, data from social media) and evolving analytic techniques offer tremendous promise for productively advancing knowledge. Regina Deil Amen, Steve DesJardins, Will Doyle, Stella Flores, Ozan Jaquette, Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, and Awilda Rodriguez are among the ASHE scholars that are making especially good use of new sources of data and emergent analytic methods.

PROMOTE THE INDIRECT INFLUENCES OF RESEARCH ON POLICY AND PRACTICE

Researchers and policymakers/practitioners have long lamented the separation of their "two communities" (Caplan, 1979). In their seminal volume, *Usable knowledge: Social science and social problem solving,* Charles Lindblom and David Cohen (1979) note policymakers' "dissatisfaction with social science and social research as instruments of social problem solving" as well as academic researchers' desire "to be more drawn upon, useful, or influential" (p. vii).

Although Caplan's (1979, p. 459) observation that "social scientists and policymakers live in separate worlds with different and often conflicting values, different reward systems, and different languages" continues to ring true, we must recognize that higher education researchers are also "policymakers, implementers, consultants, and practitioners" (Rhoades, 2006, p. 382). We enact and make policy at our academic institutions through service on committees and legislative bodies (e.g., faculty senates) and when we make decisions about admissions to graduate programs, faculty hiring and promotion, and other matters.

Over the past 40 years, many ASHE conference themes, presidential addresses, and conference sessions have called for greater connections between ASHE members and policymakers and practitioners. A review of past presidential addresses reveals our consistent and profound interest in conducting research that somehow "makes a difference" (Milem, 2011).

Some ASHE members may dismiss my emphasis on conducting research that informs policy and practice, worrying that doing so may require politicization of research (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). Politicization is certainly

possible, as research is more likely to resonate with the media, practitioners, and policymakers when it "aligns with major ideological cleavages" (Henig, 2008, p. 50). A policymaker may only introduce research into a debate about potential policy alternatives when the findings support the policymaker's ideological position (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). As Gary Rhoades (2006) observed in his presidential address, however, we all are regularly taking actions that are "inherently political" (p. 382). In our research, choices of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, and choices of policies and practices to examine, are reflections of our values and priorities and, as such, are political acts. Decisions about ASHE conference themes, conference speakers, and panel topics and participants are also political acts.

Others may argue that trying to connect research to policy and practice is a fruitless endeavor. Even with our best efforts, much of the academic research that we produce will not be used (Green et al., 2009). Some of our research – especially when not commissioned by policymakers or practitioners – will not be timed to coincide with an open policy window and/or will not resonate with a policymaker or practitioner's prior personal experience, local conditions, political priorities, and constituency preferences (Brownson et al., 2006). The "shelf-life" of research may also be limited by the complex and ever-changing nature of the problems that we are addressing and the context in which problems are occurring (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979).

Our efforts to produce research that is used to improve policy and practice will also be limited by the pervasiveness of "ordinary knowledge" about higher education. Lindblom and Cohen (1979) define "ordinary knowledge" as the knowledge that we all possess that is derived not from rigorous research methods but that reflects "common sense, causal empiricism, or thoughtful speculation and analysis" (p. 12). As higher education researchers, we regularly encounter the challenges created by ordinary knowledge: anyone who has attended college has ordinary knowledge about "what works" in higher education. Potential users of our research – including policymakers, practitioners, and journalists – assess research findings in light of their ordinary knowledge.

I worry that, in our attention to the challenges associated with making direct connections between research and policy or practice, we overlook the noteworthy indirect contributions of higher education research. Those of us who are faculty can improve policymakers and practitioners' understandings of research-based insights through our teaching and advising. In their presidential addresses, Ann Austin (2003) offered thoughtful and compelling insights about the preparation of doctoral students for faculty careers and Linda Johnsrud (2009) stressed the roles that faculty play in socializing students to draw connections between research, policy, and practice. Our students include not only future faculty and researchers, but also current and future policymakers and practitioners (Rigby, 2005; Tseng & Nutley,

2014). We encourage productive connections between research, policy, and practice by ensuring that all students have "an understanding of research methodology, policy content, and the linkages that are possible between research and policy making" (Rigby, 2005, p. 210). ASHE's Council for the Advancement of Higher Education Programs' (CAHEP) Early Career Workshop is one vehicle for advancing best practices in teaching and learning in higher education programs.

Our research also indirectly contributes to policy and practice when it informs understandings and conceptualizations of complex phenomena and problems. Academic research tends to make conceptual rather than instrumental or political contributions to knowledge because of the many indirect ways that research may influence policymaking, the difficulties associated with appropriately framing research to address particular policy problems, and the failure of available research to answer the specific policy questions policymakers are asking (Hird, 2009; Landry, Amara, & Lamari, 2001; Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Ness, 2010; Rigby, 2005; Weiss, 1977, 1979).

With our theoretical and methodological expertise, our commitments to diversity and equity, and our understanding of current and emerging issues in higher education, ASHE members can address the knowledge needs that policymakers and practitioners define AND help policymakers and practitioners identify and understand the issues that they should be addressing. As Bill Tierney (2003) challenged us in his 2002 presidential address, academics have an obligation "not to shut up and mind our own business, but to create arenas for thoughtful discussion and debate" (p. 13).

Disseminate Findings Without Circumventing Peer Review

Many mechanisms are available for sharing research results with policymakers and practitioners. By disseminating research results in outlets that are more universally available (e.g., *Education Week, Chronicle of Higher Education, Inside HigherEd, Change* magazine), we recognize that many scholarly journals are available only to those with university affiliations or who pay high access fees (Brownson et al., 2006; Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2014; Perna, 2015b; Terenzini, 1996). By providing brief (one-page) summaries with links to additional information, we recognize that policymakers and practitioners generally have limited time to fully read and determine the relevant implications of these articles (Perna, 2015b). To be used, research must be understandable by non-researchers, accessible, and distributed in a format that is quick and easy to digest (Lingenfelter, 2016; Rigby, 2005). By creating summaries and research syntheses, we can help policymakers and practitioners draw appropriate conclusions from the many, but often conflicting, studies that are available on a given topic (Brownson et al., 2006;

Fusarelli, 2008; Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Lingenfelter, 2016; Perna, 2015b; Tseng & Nutley, 2014).

Social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) and other digital technologies (websites, email) offer approaches to communicating findings to policymakers, practitioners, and reporters that are faster and more direct than the traditional mechanisms of conference presentations and journal articles (Goldie, Linick, Jabbar, & Lubienski, 2014; Henig, 2008; Hess, 2008a, 2008b; Hird, 2009; Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2014). Journalists appear to embrace proactive dissemination, as evidenced by the number of non-peer-reviewed reports that are covered by *Inside Higher Ed, Chronicle of Higher Education,* and other outlets on any given day.

Taking steps to connect the results of our research to non-academic audiences is important. Nonetheless, I am worried about potential negative and unintended consequences, especially for graduate students and early career scholars. Time spent on dissemination is time not spent engaged in research and academic writing. Opportunity costs may be especially high for graduate students and early career faculty, as academic hiring and promotion processes continue to emphasize traditional peer-reviewed publications and other products that mark "the establishment of a scholarly track record" (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2008, p. 199).

As higher education researchers, we are called to adhere to the integrity of deep intellectual work while also providing information that others can use. These are not conflicting responsibilities, but rather issues of timing. I am concerned when, in the interest of quick dissemination, we skip steps that ensure the quality of our research.

Digital technologies level the playing field for dissemination, enabling anyone to disseminate research results quickly and directly. But, digital technologies also enable us to circumvent peer-review. Directly disseminating research that has not undergone rigorous review may cause long-term damage to a scholar's reputation. The "bottom-line" orientation of new technologies often obscures key information about a study's limitations, context, and other caveats (Henig, 2008a).

Peer review, the traditional mechanism of quality control for academic research (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2008; Henig, 2008a, 2008b), certainly has weaknesses. High-quality peer review processes depend on high-quality evaluations from (typically volunteer) reviewers and take time. High-quality peer review processes also require editors, editorial boards, and reviewers who can evaluate multiple research topics, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approaches. By ensuring diversity in the characteristics of editors, editorial boards, and reviewers for major journals, we can help ensure that traditional peer-review mechanisms do not unfairly disadvantage or penalize scholars who conduct research on non-mainstream topics or advance critical interpretations.

I urge us to consider how to enhance existing peer review processes. I also encourage us to actively seek critical feedback before releasing results of our research. Feedback mechanisms may be formal, including traditional peer-review processes and advisory panels that rigorously critique pre-publication versions of reports. We should also regularly seek feedback through informal mechanisms by proactively soliciting from colleagues critical and challenging reactions to pre-publication drafts of papers and presentations (including ASHE presidential addresses). Critiques that question our assumptions and methods, identify weaknesses, and suggest productive enhancements make our work stronger.

As higher education researchers, and members of a higher education research community, we have an obligation not only to solicit critical feedback on our own work but also to provide critical feedback to others. We need to engage with those who have different views and perspectives and not ignore or demonize those who disagree with us.

Digital information and communication technologies are undoubtedly here to stay. And, educational research media in the U.S. generally include little attention to peer-reviewed research and academic experts (Yettick, 2015). In addition to my other suggestions, we also need a longer-term strategy for addressing these realities. I encourage us, as an association, to consider how ASHE may: 1) enhance ASHE members' skills in appropriately using digital technologies to disseminate high-quality research results; 2) guide senior faculty in the appropriate consideration and weighting of efforts to connect research to policy and practice in hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions; and 3) assist policymakers, practitioners, and journalists in distinguishing between poor and high-quality research (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2008; Yettick, 2015). And, I urge all of us, as individuals, to recognize that subjecting our work to high-quality peer review processes is part of what differentiates our contributions from those of opinion writers. Circumventing peer review undermines our legitimacy and authority.

Engage In Conversations With Policymakers and Practitioners

Our research should inform the issues that policymakers and practitioners are trying to address, as well as the issues that they *should be* addressing. Nonetheless, I am troubled that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have few opportunities to talk with, and learn from, each other. Attending meetings and conferences only with other researchers is one force that contributes to the perpetuation of our separate "two communities" (Caplan, 1979).

The 2015 ASHE annual meeting included two mechanisms that were intended to promote fruitful cross-community conversations: the Emerging Issues Plenary that Lumina Foundation sponsored and five presidential sessions featuring Collaborations between ASHE members and Intermediary

Organizations that the William T. Grant Foundation sponsored. The five participating intermediary organizations were: Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), National Association for Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), NAFSA: Association of International Educators, Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Education, and Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE).

By recognizing the different cultures, practices, and identities of research producers and consumers, intermediary organizations can serve as a bridge between the "two communities" (Caplan, 1979; Lingard, 2013; Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2014; Ness, 2010; Sunquist, 1978). The five collaborations are intentionally framed as partnerships, reflecting the assumption that interactive and trusting relationships between producers and consumers of research will increase the likelihood that relevant research is produced and used (Economic and Social Research Council, 2013; Hird, 2009; Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Tseng, 2012). Over this past year, the co-chairs of each group have provided essential leadership, and the five intermediary organizations have invested considerable time and energy in engaging with ASHE members.[3] As discussed in their presidential sessions at this conference, each of these collaborations accomplished a great deal in its yearlong interactions. Among other contributions, each developed a shared agenda for future research that will inform policy and practice as well as strategies for continuing cross-organizational conversations.

Other ASHE presidents have called for ASHE to advance structural mechanisms that connect researchers with policymakers. In his 1995 presidential address, Patrick Terenzini (1996) encouraged ASHE to "promote and support policy-related research" and encourage "two-way conversations" between researchers and policymakers. In 2009 Jeffrey Milem (2011) raised the possibility of moving the ASHE office to Washington, DC, arguing that geographic proximity to federal policymakers would promote connections. It is time once again, for ASHE to rethink the structural mechanisms that it offers for promoting meaningful conversations between ASHE members and policymakers, practitioners, and intermediary organizations.

Base Advocacy on Research, Not Opinion

I strongly believe that many changes in higher education are needed, but I worry about approaches that reflect single-minded advocacy. We are most effective proponents of change when we ground our advocacy in research rather than opinion or anecdote.

[3]The co-chairs of these groups were: Christopher Morphew and Harold Hartley (ASHE-CIC); Jenny Lee and Kevin Hovland (ASHE-NAFSA); Don Heller, Megan McClean Coval, Charlotte Etier, and Jacob Gross (ASHE-NASFAA); Heather Rowan-Kenyon and Margaret Cahalan (ASHE-Pell Institute); Stella Flores and Brian Prescott (ASHE-WICHE).

Have no doubt: I am an advocate, and I strongly believe that we should advocate for changes in higher education. Reflecting my personal convictions about the importance of equal opportunity, I have dedicated my career to ensuring that all students – regardless of demographic background or place of residence – have the opportunity to enroll in and benefit from high-quality higher education. I use a range of methodological approaches and theoretical lenses to conduct research on multiple dimensions of this topic. And I regularly try to persuade others, including twice testifying to Congress, about the actions that policymakers, practitioners, educators, and others can, and must, take to eliminate persistent barriers to higher education opportunity and outcomes for underrepresented and underserved students (e.g., Perna, 2014, 2015a).

When we are armed with research, we are a much more powerful force for change. We jeopardize our strategic advantages as academic researchers when we conduct studies that are designed to advance a political or ideological agenda (Lingard, 2013). Conducting research that is aligned with a political agenda is tempting, as such research may not only be more frequently used, but also "win a researcher visibility, contacts, access, and funding" (Hess, 2008b, p. 247). But conducting research to support ideological positions shifts our role from researcher to advocate (Fusarelli, 2008; Henig, 2008), and consequently jeopardizes our "ability to serve as independent sources of insight and knowledge" or revise conclusions in response to new "data, theory or arguments" (Hess, 2008b, p. 255). Leaders of intermediary organizations report that policymakers are skeptical of evangelical or zealous approaches that consistently advocate a single policy response (Perna, 2015b).

Our voices are most effective when they draw from our research. Policymakers and practitioners need more than opinionated assertions. All advocates have passion for change—but it is high quality, theoretically grounded research that makes our contributions unique—and it is our research-based knowledge that should be informing needed reforms.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF ASHE IN ENSURING FUTURE CONTRIBUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH?

In addition to this list of 10 actions for individual researchers, I also use this address to reflect on the role of ASHE, as an association of higher education researchers, in ensuring future contributions of higher education research. Like many of you, I have a deep and longstanding affection for ASHE - and see ASHE as my intellectual home. But, I also believe that it is important to reflect on how ASHE might be all that it can and should be.

A review of published research and theory suggests that a professional scholarly association like ASHE has two primary roles: protect the status

of members; and advance the production of required academic knowledge (Abbott, 1988).

Protect the Status of Members

One reason that we may join ASHE and attend the annual conference is that we value the opportunity to engage in activities that promote our professional development and career advancement. Through the conference proposal submission, review, selection, and presentation processes, ASHE provides mechanisms that enable members to signal to colleagues our qualifications and readiness for career advancement. Some components of the annual ASHE conference (e.g., Graduate Student Policy Seminar, mentoring programs offered by the pre-conferences) explicitly focus on career development. The high representation of graduate students among ASHE members (about a third) and conference attendees (about 40%) suggests that many perceive ASHE to be an effective mechanism for advancing the careers of junior scholars and communicating expectations of, and possibilities in, our field.

The flipside of the growing representation of graduate students among ASHE members and conference attendees is the low representation of senior scholars. Only about 5% of ASHE's current members report that they are full professors. This low percentage may reflect the inevitable evolution of a profession: growth in membership tends to occur among those at younger rather than older career stages.

But, this low representation may also be explained by a different conclusion: senior faculty do not see value in attending the annual meeting.

Advance the Production of Required Academic Knowledge

One way to encourage continued participation in ASHE of senior faculty, as well as other members, is to ensure that ASHE is fulfilling its second central purpose as a professional association: producing the high-quality research that improves knowledge of important current and emerging issues in higher education. Based on his review of relevant literature, Abbott (1988) noted that "professionalism" is a mechanism for "institutionalizing expertise" (p. 323) and defined a profession as "an occupational group with some special skill" (p. 8). We could consider "higher education researcher" to be a profession. But, higher education researcher is also a profession that is linked to, or in service to, the professions of higher education policymaker and higher education administrator. Abbott's (1988) framing suggests that the legitimacy of the field of higher education research depends on whether we are producing the knowledge that higher education policymakers and practitioners need to understand the problems that need to be addressed, identify effective policies and practices for solving the problems, and determine reasonable actions in the absence of clearly identified solutions.

Providing this knowledge does not mean that higher education researchers only conduct research on issues that policymakers and practitioners identify. Providing this knowledge also means that we, as experts on higher education research, use theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous approaches to help policymakers and practitioners understand the issues that they should be addressing.

ACTIONS WE MUST TAKE

ASHE members have made many noteworthy contributions to knowledge about higher education during ASHE's first 40 years. But, past achievements are not enough. We need to act now to ensure that we will be continuing to make research-based contributions into the future. Like a bad weed, many of the challenges that threatened the promise and potential of higher education 40 years ago, persist. And, many new challenges germinate and sprout, even as we meet here today.

As members of ASHE, we have an obligation to ensure that ASHE is an association that both promotes career development of members, and advances the production and dissemination of high-quality research-based knowledge on current and emerging issues in higher education. I encourage us, as a collective, to continue to consider two questions:

1) What is the role of ASHE in guiding and advancing effective approaches for disseminating high-quality research results using prevailing information and communication technologies?
2) What structural mechanisms should ASHE advance into the future so as to provide meaningful opportunities for ASHE members to engage with higher education policymakers, practitioners, intermediary organizations, and journalists?

There is no shortage of advocacy groups, lobbyists, and think tanks – often with their own self-interested agendas – offering "solutions" to the challenges facing higher education. Our role, as higher education researchers, is to be a trusted source of rigorous, evidence-based, theoretically grounded research.

If we embrace the 10 action items that I outlined in this address, our research will be valued for how it gets to the crux of problems facing higher education. Our analysis will be valued for its rigor and trustworthiness. And our proposed solutions will be valued for being based on evidence, rather than ordinary knowledge or opinions.

By taking the 10 actions I have identified, we are positioned to make important and needed contributions to knowledge into the future.

The time to act is now. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said, "Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough; we must do" (Jensen, 2011).

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as president of ASHE this past year. This is a vibrant and active community and I feel privileged to be a part of it. I am confident that ASHE will continue to be an association that allows us to work together, to challenge one another, to challenge the status quo, and to address the important problems facing higher education.

Acknowledgements

One of my primary goals for this presidential address was to spark conversation about the roles of ASHE and ASHE members' research. This document reflects the address that I delivered at the ASHE conference in Denver, Colorado on November 5, 2015, as revised to reflect insights that I gained from these conversations. I am grateful to Shaun Harper, Vivian Gadsden, Gary Rhoades, Scott Thomas, and Bill Tierney for the very helpful critiques, insights, and feedback that they provided on earlier versions of this document.

References

Abbott, A. (1988). *The system of professions: An essay on the division of expert labor.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Austin, A. (2003). Creating a bridge to the future: Preparing new faculty to face changing expectations in a changing context. *Review of Higher Education, 26*, 119–144.

Baum, S., Ma, J., & Payea, K. (2013). *Education Pays.* Washington, DC: College Board.

Brownson, R. C., Royer, C., Ewing, R., & McBride, T. D. (2006). Researchers and policymakers: Travelers in parallel universes, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 30,* 164–172.

Caplan, N. (1979). The two-communities theory and knowledge utilization. *American Behavioral Scientist, 22,* 459–470.

Cassel, K. (2015, November). Finding a capable evaluator to conduct a high-quality randomized controlled trial in postsecondary education: A resource. New York, NY: Laura and John Arnold Foundation. Retrieved from *http://www.arnoldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Researchers-who-have-conducted-high-quality-postsec-RCTs-Nov-2015.pdf*

Duncan, G. J., & Murnane, R. J. (2014). *Restoring opportunity: The crisis of inequality and the challenge for American education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Economic and Social Research Council. (2013). *Cultivating connections: Innovation and consolidation in the ESRC's impact evaluation programme.* Swindon, UK: Author.

Inside Higher Ed (2015, November 2). Is Wisconsin system chief backtracking on tenure? *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from *https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/11/02/wisconsin-system-chief-backtracking-tenure*

Fusarelli, L. D. (2008). Flying (partially) blind: School leaders' use of research in decision making. In F. M. Hess (Ed.), *When research matters: How scholarship influences policy* (pp. 177–196). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Gates, B. (1996). *The road ahead*, 2nd edition New York, NY: Penguin Books.
Goldhaber, D. D., & Brewer, D. J. (2008). What gets studied and why: Examining the incentives that drive education research. In F. M. Hess (Ed.), *When research matters: How scholarship influences policy* (pp. 197–217). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
Goldie, D., Linick, M., Jabbar, H., & Lubienski, C. (2014). Using bibliometric and social media analysis to explore the "echo chamber" hypothesis. *Educational Policy*, *28*(2), 281–305.
Green, L. W., Ottoson, J. M., Garcia, C., & Hiatt, R. A. (2009). Diffusion theory and knowledge dissemination, utilization, and integration in public health. *Annual Review of Public Health, 30,* 151–174.
Henig, J. R. (2008). The evolving relationship between researchers and public policy. In F. M. Hess (Ed.), *When research matters: How scholarship influences policy* (pp. 41–62). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
Hess, F. M. (2008a). Introduction. In F. M. Hess (Ed.), *When research matters: How scholarship influences policy* (pp. 1–15). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
Hess, F. M. (2008b). Conclusion: Education research and public Policy. In F. M. Hess (Ed.), *When research matters: How scholarship influences policy* (pp. 239–256). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
Hird, J. A. (2009). The study and use of policy research in state legislatures. *International Regional Science Review, 32,* 523–535.
Jensen, A.K. (2011). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, *http://www.iep.utm.edu/goethe/*
Johnsrud, L. K. (2009). Faculty work: Making our research matter. *Review of Higher Education, 31*, 489–504.
Kellams, S. (1977). ASHE membership survey results. *Review of Higher Education, 1*(1), 39–44.
Landry, R., Amara, N., & Lamari, M. (2001). Climbing the ladder of research utilization, *Science Communication, 22,* 396–422.
Lindblom, C. E., & Cohen, D. K. (1979). *Usable knowledge: Social science and social problem solving.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Lingard, B. (2013). The impact of research on education policy in an era of evidence-based policy. *Critical Studies in Education, 54,* 113–131.
Lingenfelter, P. E. (2016). *"Proof," policy and practice: Avoiding pitfalls and unlocking the potential of evidence to improve education.* Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, Inc.
Lubienski, C., Scott, J., & DeBray, E. (2014). The politics of research use in education policymaking, *Educational Policy, 28,* 131–144.
Marcus, J. (2014). The erratic path of Hungarian higher education, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 46*(3), 37-44.
May, H., Rodriguez, A., Sirinides, P. M., Perna, L. W., Yee, A., & Ransom, T. (2013). *Apples and oranges: Comparing the backgrounds and academic trajectories of International Baccalaureate (IB) students to a matched comparison group*. Philadelphia, PA: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.
Milem, J. (2011). Considering our legacy: Doing work that really matters. *Review of Higher Education, 34,* 319–333.

Ness, E. C. (2010). The role of information in the policy process: Implications for the examination of research utilization in higher education policy. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (Vol. 25, pp. 1–49). New York: Springer.

Perna, L. W. (2006). Studying college choice: A proposed conceptual model. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 21, pp. 99-157). Springer.

Perna, L. W. (2014, July 24). *The role of states in higher education.* Invited testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. Washington, DC.

Perna, L. W. (2015a, April). *Improving college access and completion for low-income and first-generation students: The role of college access and success programs.* Invited testimony presented to the Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training, Committee on Education and the Workforce, United States House of Representatives, Washington, DC.

Perna, L. W. (2015b). Connecting research and state policy: Implications for academic researchers and intermediary organizations. Unpublished manuscript.

Perna, L. W., & Finney, J. (2014). *The attainment agenda: State policy leadership in higher education.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Perna, L. W., Orosz, K., & Jumakulov, Z. (2015). Understanding the human capital benefits of a government-funded international scholarship program: An exploration of Kazakhstan's Bolashak Program. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *40*, 85-97.

Perna, L. W., Ruby, A., Boruch, R., Wang, N., Scull, J., Ahmad, S., & Evans, C. (2014). Moving through MOOCs: Understanding the progression of users in MOOCs. *Educational Researcher, 43,* 421–432.

Perna, L. W., & Ruiz, R. (in press). Technology in higher education: Moving from ubiquity to transformation. In P. Altbach, P. Gumport, & M. Bastedo (Eds.), *American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Rendón, L. I. (2000). Academics at heart: Reconnecting the scientific mind with the spirit's artistry. *Review of Higher Education, 24,* 1–13.

Rhoades, G. (2006). The higher education we choose: A question of balance. Review of Higher Education, 29(3), 381–404.

Rhoads, R. A. (2015). *MOOCs, high technology, and higher learning.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Rigby, E. (2005). Linking research and policy on Capitol Hill. *Evidence and Policy*, *1*(2), 195–212.

Rogers, W. (n.d.). *The official website of Will Rogers.* The Estate of Will Rogers. http://www.cmgww.com/historic/rogers/about/life_human_nature.html

Scott, J., & Jabbar, H. (2014). The hub and the spokes: Foundations, intermediary organizations, incentivist reforms, and the politics of research evidence. *Educational Policy*, *28*(2), 233–257.

Sunquist, J. I. (1978). Research brokerage: The weak link. In L. E. Lynn (Ed.). *Knowledge and policy: The uncertain connection* (pp. 126–144). Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences.

Terenzini, P. (1996). Rediscovering boots: Public policy and higher education. *Review of Higher Education, 20,* 5–13.

Tierney, W. G. (2003). Remembrance of things past: Trust and the obligations of the intellectual. *Review of Higher Education, 27,* 1–15.

Tseng, V. (2012). *The use of research in policy and practice* (Social Policy Report Vol. 26, No. 2). New York: William T. Grant Foundation.

Tseng, V., & Nutley, S. (2014). Building the infrastructure to improve the use and usefulness of research in education. In K. S. Finnigan & A. J. Daly (Eds.), *Using research evidence in education: From the schoolhouse door to Capitol Hill* (pp. 163–175). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.

Weiss, C. (1977). Research for policy's sake: The enlightenment function of social research. *Policy Analysis, 3,* 531–545.

Weiss, C. (1979). The many meanings of research utilization. *Public Administration Review, 39,* 426–431.

Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education. (2012). *Knocking on the college door.* Boulder, CO: Author.

Wong, K. K. (2008). Considering the politics in the research policymaking nexus. In F. M. Hess (Ed.), *When research matters: How scholarship influences policy* (pp. 219–237). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Yettick, H. (2015). One small droplet: News media coverage of peer-reviewed and university-based education research and academic expertise. *Educational Researcher*, *44*(3), 173–184.