

Foreword

AS I READ Michael Feuer's *The Rising Price of Objectivity: Philanthropy, Government, and the Future of Education Research*, I was reminded of two experiences, both of which pertain to this timely and wise book.

The first experience occurred some years ago, when, as president of the Spencer Foundation, I was invited to brief a group of congressmen and senators about the needs of the education research community. After listening to my plea for more funding to study fundamental problems of teaching, learning, leadership, and organization, one then prominent member of the House commented that we did not need more research since we knew what was needed to improve education. All we needed, he said, was “better teachers” and that did not necessitate research. I countered by saying, that, yes, we did need better teachers—we always need better teachers—but that research would help us understand how to prepare and help those teachers. That did not please my friend the congressman, who replied: “You professors are all alike. You make things too complicated.” Having delivered that message, he then turned on his heels and left the meeting.

I thought of that exchange as I read *The Rising Price of Objectivity* because the book poses a rightly complicated and very important question: are current conditions in the philanthropic world, and among government research funders and private think-tank and research policy organizations, likely to erode possibilities for informing education policy with evidence culled from careful, disinterested, balanced research? In addressing that question, Michael raises a number of concerns about philanthropy, having to do with issues of accountability and the potential for special influence among today's super rich. In doing so, he calls out those critics of the

best-known large foundations, notably Gates, Broad, and Walton, for being unduly harsh and simplistic and balances the charges that have been leveled against those organizations with historic comparisons as well as with carefully crunched data about the grant making of a wide range of funders.

In framing his worries about the nation's capacity to base its education policies on solid, warranted knowledge, Michael does not limit his discussion to philanthropy. He analyzes the full array of factors that shapes what policy makers know as they set the course for our schools and colleges. As I read Michael's discussion, I wished I could say, "Sorry, Mr. Congressman, this is, indeed, a complex matter and it needs a complicated story." Here, all in one short and eminently readable volume, one is asked to contemplate any number of matters relevant to the production, distribution, and use of education research. In all cases, one is also invited to consider both sides of the issue. For example, it is generally considered to be a good thing that an increasing number of people have been trained in research methods and are engaged in studying education. But an increased supply of researchers also intensifies the struggle to win funding, which may encourage researchers to tell funders what they want to hear, rather than what they need to hear. Here's another example. To be accountable, foundations must be open to assessments of their giving, more open than has traditionally been the case. But is it possible to have fully "objective" assessments when anyone engaged in such an exercise is likely to want to please the foundation he or she is studying in order to be eligible for future assignments or even a grant? *The Rising Price of Objectivity* offers a comprehensive, scholarly account of the many dilemmas involved in funding and making sense of research relevant to the making of sound education policy. Just for that it is a must-read book, but it offers even more.

To explain, let me turn to my second experience. Shortly before I met my favorite congressman, I was invited to serve on a National Research Council committee that was impaneled to generate advice for Congress concerning the meaning of "scientific research" in education. When we gathered for our first meeting and went around the table introducing ourselves to one another, I was dismayed to find that the committee included a number of people who had taken positions on matters of education policy with which I vehemently disagreed. Over twelve months of fairly intense

work on our report, we all got to know one another quite well and learned to talk frankly about the evidence we were reviewing. The political labels we had brought to our work—ranging from conservative to liberal or, in my case, “overly soft Deweyite”—quickly became meaningless. What mattered were the rationales we articulated for the positions we espoused.

The work of that committee and many others like it explains not only the topic of this book, but also the tone of its argument. Through a long and distinguished career at the Office of Technology Assessment and the National Research Council, Michael Feuer has been schooled in civil discourse aimed at achieving consensus based on reliable data. He brings the beliefs, values, habits of mind, and style of argumentation he acquired working at those organizations to the concerns he describes here. He has seen the way groups of people, coming from very different backgrounds and positions, can talk across difference in a common quest to understand a controversial problem. He has witnessed their capacity to approach, through open discussion, their best approximation of a full and true clarification of what is involved in that problem. His experience has convinced him that, however imperfect it may be, knowledge generated in this way provides a good basis for policy making in a democratic society such as ours. It’s a reasonable, enlightened position, presented with passionate, yet tempered, care; and its appeal in this era of anti-intellectualism and high partisanship should be great.

The Rising Price of Objectivity closes with a number of concrete proposals for improving the processes by which research funding is distributed, public and private funders are held accountable, and the findings of research are aggregated and disseminated. Whether any of his recommendations actually gain traction—and, as Michael suggests, their merits would depend on how they were worked out in practice—they underscore the importance of this book. *The Rising Price of Objectivity* is a commentary on the way we have set the direction and rules for collective, public action since at least the time of the Civil War. That approach—especially as it relates to the increasingly complex environment of philanthropic and government support for education research—may need some adjustment today. At the same time, to abandon it through indifference, without due deliberation, would be an unfortunate mistake. That is Michael Feuer’s

message in this compelling new book, and as concerned citizens we should take note.

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