

# Introduction

A FEW YEARS AGO, at a gathering to celebrate the retirement of a distinguished colleague, an education researcher who had also held many high-level policy positions, I went on a little fishing expedition. I wondered aloud if anyone else was worried about the role of large private foundations in school reform, about the extent to which their influence is subject to any form of public accountability, whether their connections to the federal government are a problem, and what all of this might mean for education research and the uses of social science to inform public policy.

Lots of bait there, and I was glad to be in friendly waters—or so I thought.

My question was mild compared to the rather more potent rhetoric that was seeping into the public discourse. One of the harshest examples appeared earlier that year in Diane Ravitch's book slamming the high-stakes accountability and reform strategies of the Bush and Obama administrations.<sup>1</sup> Her chapter on the changing role of big philanthropy includes the now familiar trope about the "the billionaire boys club," which has endured as a recurrent motif in her frequent and fierce blogging. Ravitch summarized her basic argument in an interview with *Democracy Now!* in March 2010:

We have never in the history of the United States had foundations with the wealth of the Gates Foundation and some of the other billionaire foundations—the Walton Family Foundation, The Broad Foundation. And these three . . . are committed now to charter schools and to evaluating teachers by test scores. And that's now the policy of the US Department of Education. *We have never seen anything like this, where*

*foundations had the ambition to direct national educational policy, and in fact are succeeding.* [italics added]<sup>2</sup>

Note the several arguments woven there: the magnitude of current foundation giving allegedly unique in history, the commitment to a particular (and questionable) reform agenda, and the influence of foundations on national policy. Other commentators have amplified the theme in even more shrill tones, as in this excerpt from an article by Joanne Barkan in 2011:

A few billion dollars in private foundation money, strategically invested every year for a decade, has sufficed to *define the national debate* on education; sustain a crusade for a set of mostly ill-conceived reforms; and *determine public policy* at the local, state, and national levels. In the domain of venture philanthropy—where *donors decide* what social transformation they want to engineer and then design and fund projects to implement their vision—investing in education yields great bang for the buck. [italics added]<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, my query was mild, inquisitive more than assertive. Still, one listener didn't like where I was heading. "Michael," he quipped, "you're starting to sound more and more like Richard Nixon." Ouch! I offered my friend the knife from my heart, we had a few laughs, and we turned our attention to other pressing issues such as whether the Washington Nationals would make it to the playoffs. I recall that it was fun thinking that Richard Nixon—no friend of foundations when they tried to assert a progressive influence in education and other social policy areas—and Diane Ravitch may have had more in common than either of them would likely want to admit, an irony made juicier given Ravitch's journey from her role in a Republican administration that was suspiciously and punitively critical of public education, circa 1988, to her exalted status as a left-leaning defender of teachers and teacher unions today.<sup>4</sup>

In any case, being likened to Richard Nixon is not something you forget easily, and in the years since I have continued to smart from the suggestion. Though I am even more worried today about trends in funding of education research (and the social sciences generally), I have come to

believe that outsized attacks on the role of big foundations are not helpful, and that the real challenges to the production of useful and credible evidence to advise policy makers will not be solved if we succumb to extreme rhetoric. Ravitch's claim that "we have never seen anything like this" is surprising coming from a historian with a substantial record of publications and public service. Yes, the scale is different—Mike McPherson, a prominent foundation head and education leader, once quipped that Gates is the only foundation you can see from outer space. But there *is* precedent worth remembering.

For example, in its day, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, now the twenty-first-largest foundation in the United States (as of the end of 2014), was considered a pioneering behemoth of private largesse.<sup>5</sup> The distinguished Bard College education historian Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, former president of the Spencer Foundation and former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, quotes Henry Pritchett, who had led the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (founded in 1905) and then became a key architect of the new corporation: "[Andrew] Carnegie had established the greatest endowment ever given to a group of men for the promotion and diffusion of knowledge and understanding amongst the people of a nation."<sup>6</sup>

Historical data of this sort is helpful—I should say mandatory—in weighing claims and counterclaims about the size and influence of philanthropic organizations. We also need to view in historical perspective allegations that, in today's environment, there is too much alignment between foundations and the government. We need a wide lens to look into these matters, one capable of three- and four-dimensional views: changes in the scope and power of philanthropy and connections between the private foundation sector and the federal government are not taking place in a policy vacuum, but rather during a period of recurrent turbulence in the world of research generally and the behavioral, social, and education sciences specifically.

Which is why the query to my colleagues included reference to the changing federal role. In my mind was the nagging feeling, borne of my own increasingly difficult attempts to obtain grants from agencies such as the US Department of Education, the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Maybe my pile of unfunded

proposals was the symptom of a deeper and more systemic pathology? To paraphrase the joke attributed to Freud, sometimes those sour grapes might really be sour.

Here, too, it can be tempting to overstate current trends and ignore the longer history. Periodically in our past, the idea of public funding of science has suffered the ups and downs of economically driven budget cycles, and has been subjected to intense public and political scrutiny. Indeed, our remarkable progress in science and technology, largely the result of decisions taken after World War II (which, for example, led to the establishment of the NSF), would not have been possible without that kind of introspection. Today, again, we confront political challenges to research, bordering, in some cases, on intrusions that have the scientific community quite rightly rattled; and although neither reduced budgets nor edginess about government “waste” are new phenomena on the American scene, that’s not a reason to ignore current trends.<sup>7</sup>

Consider, for example, the rising supply of qualified scientists (in many fields), which I happily take as an indicator of the robustness of our university-based training programs. These researchers seek varying levels of externally sponsored financial support, depending on the nature of their work and the need for expensive laboratory equipment or data collections; and without proportional increases in available funding, increased demand for research dollars inevitably leads to increased competition, which may not always result in better-quality proposals or projects. If the squeeze on federal resources pushes new scholars to the private sector, that is, the corporate or nonprofit foundation world, those organizations may find themselves in even more powerful and influential roles, but operating without the customary constraints and traditions that ensure quality control, protection of human and other subjects, sharing of data, and transparency in dissemination of results. Will reduced federal support lead to even more anxiety about the disproportionate role of foundations? It is this type of convergence, a kind of financial pincer, even more than the apparent synchronization of public and philanthropic strategic preferences, that worries me.

I believe that, on balance, the American approach to funding of science, which has always involved some degree of private and public partnership, has done more good than harm, recurrent fluctuations in quantity

and political enthusiasm notwithstanding.<sup>8</sup> The question now is whether today's trends portend a more gloomy future, and whether and how education and education research specifically might suffer. Add to this question yet another aspect of our ecology of research, namely, the role of organizations that exist to provide independent and "objective" scientific advice to inform policy, and the picture becomes more complicated and, in a sense, even more troubling.

The common complaint that American culture (political culture especially) is anti-intellectual is hard to square with our history of a robust appetite for independent, credible, and, in many cases, quantitative information to inform and advise those in charge of designing and implementing public policy. Americans may flirt with stupidity, but they buy knowledge. Nothing more effectively grabs the public psyche than international comparative statistics on student achievement, the latest findings from epidemiological studies of smoking or obesity, new data on economic and educational inequality, evidence of decline in life expectancy, or the average salaries earned by corporate moguls. Although less obviously relevant to public policy, sports statistics fill pages of newspapers and websites. At the federal level, especially, there is substantial demand for independent and credible data on a wide range of social and economic and educational issues: by some estimates, we spend upward of \$5 billion per year on data collections, studies, evaluations, and research ostensibly aimed at bringing hard evidence to the table where complex policy questions are debated and political decisions are ultimately negotiated.<sup>9</sup>

How the findings from all that research actually make their way into policy remains murky—as it must, given the tensions and complexities etched into the system. Part of the American governance experiment, now in its third century, is reconciling a craving for data with a distrust of experts, in managing a system that thrives on numbers but makes decisions by politics, in wanting nationally representative and reliable advice but still privileging locally inspired decisions. We never liked the idea of "philosopher-kings," or "scientist-kings" for that matter; on the other hand, we have always wanted input from men (and, more recently, women) in their lab coats, even if their recommendations are not easily or quickly incorporated into policy and practice. There is more than a hint of "approach-avoidance conflict" in our historical relationship to scientific knowledge.

In this peculiar ecology of politics and governance, we have cultivated a special niche for organizations that aspire to intellectual and scientific neutrality, offering nonpartisan analyses of social and economic problems and advice based on ostensibly objective research and deliberation. Of course, universities play a dominant role here, though, by and large, the knowledge they produce comes from individual researchers (faculty and students) and doesn't usually carry their institution's imprimatur explicitly. The popular press often cites scholars' work with reference to where they work or to the institution that publishes the journal in which they are publishing. When the headline reads "Harvard Gun-control Study Destroys Gun-control Agenda," the university is clearly not responsible for the opinions or findings expressed in the cited report.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, university-based research may have an impact on policy, but that's not its principal *raison d'être*.

The think tank, on the other hand, in its various forms, is a different invention that responds explicitly to the demand for evidence to support policy decisions, and is neither as enriched nor as burdened by standards of academic inquiry and freedom as universities and the scholars who do research and teach in them. I focus on this segment of what I shall be calling the "advice industry" in chapter 3. Some think tanks operate as holding companies for individual scholars and policy analysts and, in that sense, bear a resemblance to the way research is organized in universities. Frequently, the staff are given license to pursue their own studies and apply varying evidentiary standards within the norms and cultures of their respective fields and disciplines; increasingly, they are encouraged to articulate personal opinions that may precede or follow from their analyses.

In some cases, there is a greater institutional role in such matters as review and publication, with strict rules about what gets released, to whom, and following what kind of scrutiny. The RAND Corporation, for example, which is a combination think tank and contract research and evaluation organization, has a long and honored tradition of rigorous peer review and resistance to meddling by funders when it designs studies or reports results. Other organizations—the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), the National Academy of Education (NAEd), the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA)—have (or had) their own special features, in terms of their institutional affiliations, funding sources, honorific and service

responsibilities, and review mechanisms. Indeed, because these organizations are (or, in the case of OTA, were) founded and structured with quite stringent definitions of their respective public responsibilities and legal overlays, they occupy an important niche in the advice industry; and as I will argue in chapters 3 and 4, some of their main features are worth considering as we explore mechanisms and policy options aimed at reinforcing the role of research to inform policy generally and education specifically.

It pays to expand this discussion, as it relates to a central question of this book, namely, whether the aspiration for political and financial neutrality in social science research, so necessary for the sake of assuring the credibility of evidence, is at risk because of the confluence of market forces and the increasingly strident partisanship of public and political discourse. One way research organizations strive to avoid the appearance or reality of external influence affecting the tone, substance, and credibility of advice, especially when it may include critiques of government activity, is to avoid taking any federal funding. Unlike the NAS and NAEd, which receive substantial funding from the government (the NAS operates under special legally binding arrangements designed to protect scientific integrity), and OTA, which was an arm of Congress and operated under a federal budget line item, major think tanks such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (founded in 1910) still adhere to the policy of refusing government money. On the other hand, the Brookings Institution (founded in 1916) gets a small fraction of its total program budget from government grants and contracts.<sup>11</sup> RAND, and American Institutes for Research, on the other hand, two of the largest and most respected private contract research and evaluation shops, obtain the lion's share of their funding from government, which makes their processes of review and dissemination all the more important. Smaller organizations, for example, the Center on Education Policy (founded in 1995 as an independent nonprofit and now part of the George Washington University), began with a self-imposed rejection of federal support, but are now rethinking their attitudes, given the changing nature of private and corporate philanthropy and the awareness that federal funds have long been an essential source of support for scientific research.

My point here is that the structure and governance of think tanks and their norms of inquiry and communication (discussed in greater detail

in chapter 3) are important factors in understanding their role in policy making. The additional issue I address in this book is whether and to what extent changes in the style and substance of private-sector philanthropy, which has been a traditional patron of many such research organizations (including those that do accept public funds), coupled with changes in the scope and magnitude of the federal role brought about by fiscal and political constraints, affect their capacity to produce and diffuse credible and objective research.

I will suggest that three concurrent and overlapping sets of forces may together be compromising the principle of research oriented to the improvement of policy and practice. It is a motif that keeps deans of social science and education and other citizens who care about *evidence-informed advice* awake at night.<sup>12</sup> The book explores the convergence of (1) the rise of “strategic” philanthropy in an increasingly crowded field of corporate and family foundations, (2) budget constraints and recurrent government reluctance to fund objective and independent research applied to understanding and solving social and educational problems, and (3) a financially pinched advice industry that may be less and less able to steer clear of partisan and commercial influence. Although I usually try to “worry efficiently,” I do wonder if the ideal of independent and objective scientific advice is essentially doomed.<sup>13</sup> In more theoretical language, are there natural (or what economists might refer to as “tragic”) outcomes that are predictable given the collision of individual researchers’ interests (their legitimate need to raise external support for their work and their desire to advance professionally) and the public good (objective inquiry that challenges mainstream views, even those promulgated by the biggest public and private funders)?

In chapter 1, I start with trends in the foundation world, which has become something of a *bête noire* in the contemporary discourse on education reform. I consider economic and political aspects of the American approach to charitable giving, and implications for the provision of public goods generally and education specifically. I review recent data on spending patterns among foundations of different sizes, along with selected narratives those foundations use to describe their missions.<sup>14</sup>

The upshot of my analysis is a pair of complementary arguments. First, much of the rhetoric about the dangers of excessive private investment in social reforms—especially but not limited to education—is exaggerated.

There may be something vaguely satisfying in scapegoating people or organizations with massive wealth; after all, even liberals enjoy some *schadenfreude* now and then. But ultimately little good comes from attacks that play loose with logic and facts and undermine a tradition, rooted in the core principles of American democracy, which, on balance, has done more good than harm.

At the same time, this defense should not be read as an apology for the status quo. My second argument is that the sensationalist rhetoric notwithstanding, trends toward advocacy-driven philanthropy and concentration of private wealth need careful monitoring. The drift among some of the largest foundations away from traditional norms of knowledge production and diffusion and toward the selective gathering of data to support programs based on partisan ideology, rather than sound empirical inquiry, threatens the value of research applied to the improvement of governance and advancement of the public good.

In chapter 2, I turn to trends in federally funded scientific research, with a focus on the agencies principally responsible for education and the education sciences. I rely mostly on publicly accessible data from the NSF, the US Department of Education, and the NIH, which have websites permitting detailed compilations of statistics on funding, grants, and related information. Again, I am concerned here with a problematic convergence of patterns. The good news is evidence of growth in the supply of well-trained education researchers seeking to orient their scholarship to improvement of education and other public goods. Enrollments in graduate programs in social science generally and education specifically have been stable (and, in some areas, growing), and I would argue that the rising supply of doctoral-level social scientists reflects a healthy and abiding commitment to research as a tool for understanding and solving social and economic problems.<sup>15</sup>

The less good news is about the funding environment. Growth in the supply of scientists seeking research grants would naturally lead to increased competition and reduced odds of obtaining needed funds even if federal research and development (R&D) budgets were stable; but when those budgets are strapped, which is the case today in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008–2009 and the sequestration of federal funds, the likelihood of securing needed funding has dropped further. Perhaps even more important than these economic constraints are the motivations of

politicians who are unable or unwilling to fathom the long-term benefits of research—especially when the findings might interfere with ideology and religion—and the result is a toxic brew that threatens the scientific research enterprise generally and its role in education reform and improvement specifically.

Chapter 3 is about the advice industry, the increasingly dense constellation of think tanks, research-intensive universities, and nonprofit as well as for-profit research and evaluation companies that are deservedly hailed as bastions of objectivity and independence but have lately become more vulnerable to the forces of competition and the influence of private and public sponsors of their work. I focus on trends outside the university sector, where dramatic growth in the number of research organizations and think tanks, especially those that, for good reason, have not sought federal financial support for fear of appearing beholden to political agendas, has led to substantially heightened competition for limited private (philanthropic) resources.

The predicament that all think tanks and other players in the advice industry face, and one that is of obvious concern to a general public awaiting credible evidence, is this: Does accepting financial support from corporate and nonprofit foundations, from foreign governments with geopolitical or economic interests, or from other interested parties compromise the objectivity and credibility of the studies these research organizations are asked to conduct? Do researchers working in think tanks (and other such organizations) feel explicit or tacit pressure to tailor their studies (and findings) for fear of losing the needed financial support? How different would the perception and reality of institutional objectivity be if think tanks more readily accepted support from government agencies charged with promoting scientific research?

On the surface, it might appear that more competition should result in more rigorous and credible advice: in general, competition is said to drive up quality. But what if think tanks pursue market share by offering a tailored product line—studies and evaluations with findings more finely tuned to the perceived needs or preferences of their prospective clients—even at the expense of scientific standards of evidence? Do they face incentives to cut corners on basic methodological principles? In these times of heightened cynicism, it would perhaps not be surprising, but would still

be painful to acknowledge, if norms of inquiry in think tanks and other advice-giving institutions were compromised for the sake of producing results more favorable to existing or anticipated funders, many of whom, as I have already suggested, give the impression of starting with strong and preconceived views about what the problems are and how to fix them. Anecdotal evidence as reported in the mainstream media, based largely on conversations with researchers in even the most prominent think tanks, does not clinch this argument about threats to objectivity, but it does ring an alarm.<sup>16</sup>

Whether universities faced with declining enrollments and other fiscal pressures are vulnerable to these forces further complicates the picture. Early-career faculty with impeccable research training need extramural support of their research, which is of course a key component in their quest for academic advancement and tenure. Moreover, many university-employed academics have secondary affiliations at major think tanks, further muddying the waters of institutional type as a determinant of research scope and style. There is sufficient reason to worry that scholars, wherever they work, find themselves steered toward funding sources that expect certain kinds of results. Once again, the convergence of forces perpetuates a vicious cycle: increased competition may cause erosion of evidentiary standards, leading to loss of faith in science as an input to governance, which in turn may further reduce public confidence even in our world-class university system and public willingness to pay for it, which in turn adds fuel to the fire of research budget cuts, which creates more competition. Intercepting this fast-moving train without injuring all the passengers is a complex policy challenge.

Which is the focus of chapter 4, where I summarize the key arguments and weave in four potential policy interventions, aimed at reducing the potential damage from these trends. I focus on education, but hope my proposals may spur discussions of whether and how the issues I'm raising affect other fields of research applied to policy and governance. My recommendations, framed as policy options to generate a broader debate, derive from an underlying set of assumptions (or hopes): that objective research is valued as a public good, that the system through which credible and useful education research is pumped into the policy discourse may not be sustainable without collective action to assure its viability, and that we

have the political will and institutional creativity to design and implement corrective and protective policies. Cynics who deny the validity of any or all of these assumptions might as well put the book down now.

## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

In the book's title and scattered throughout, I use "objective" or "objectivity," which sets off alarm bells for some readers, especially philosophers who have actually struggled to make meaning of such words. I am grateful to anonymous reviewers for alerting me to the distracting effect this word might have. For example, one reviewer noted that "objectivity" is sometimes used to "dismiss disciplinary research (history, anthropology, philosophy, law, and qualitative sociology) in favor of quantitative studies," and asked, "What would important research look like in education if the research questions, methods, and write-up weren't influenced by researchers' values and beliefs?" So I want to try to clarify first, and then offer a compromise.

I do not mean by "objectivity" a preference for a particular type of research, for example, quantitative and experimental studies, over research of a more qualitative or ethnographic nature. In fact, I have written elsewhere and align myself with those who argue that qualitative inquiry has a long and established tradition, that its scientific features are (or should be) debated no more and no less than so-called quantitative studies, and that, in the community of scholars who define themselves as "qualitative," there are many who apply relevant and rigorous evidentiary standards as regularly as do their colleagues in political science, econometrics, psychometrics, and quantitative sociology.<sup>17</sup>

I have also written on the need to acknowledge, invite, and even celebrate the role of personal values and experience in the construction of research designs. Simply put, my argument is not only an ethical one—that the values and viewpoints of practitioners should be respected—but that good theory hinges on deep understanding of experience, on what Lee Shulman calls "the wisdom of practice."<sup>18</sup> So, again, "objectivity" does not rule out these inputs, although I do hope that careful and nonpartisan advice is not stifled by ideology, experience, and personal preferences of those providing the advice.

I use the word in this book in its more intuitive meaning, as it appears in essays, official documents, and books related to scientific evidence and the policy process. A good example is from the home page of the NAS, which presents itself as “the nation’s pre-eminent source of high-quality, *objective* advice on science, engineering, and health matters.” [italics added]<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in his very useful book on the history of the OTA, another organization devoted to the synthesis of independent and credible information as input to science and technology policy, Peter Blair notes that “[i]n OTA’s early days TAB [the Technology Assessment Board] . . . recognized . . . that in order for the agency to carry out *objective* analysis, it would be necessary to separate the planning and day-to-day operations, including, especially, appointment of project staff and advisory panelists, from the members’ individual offices.” [italics added]<sup>20</sup> In his comprehensive study of think tanks in America, Thomas Medvetz also reveals a belief about “objectivity” held by leaders of these organizations: for example, the head of the Committee for Economic Development is quoted as saying, “[W]e really come at these issues as *objectively* as we can, without any sort of upfront ideological or partisan bias.” [italics added]<sup>21</sup>

With these caveats and considerations about language, then, I will continue to use the words “objective” and “objectivity” as shorthand for an *aspiration*: to anticipate and contain the effects of preferences or ideology in the framing of studies, to try to separate fact from opinion in the delivery of advice to policy makers, and to prevent the virtues of partisan argumentation so important in a vibrant democracy like ours from choking off the production of independent findings. With gratitude to that anonymous reviewer, for me objectivity means “evidence gathered by researchers who are insulated from the pressure of funders to reach a given set of conclusions and recommendations.”