

**AN ANALYSIS OF FRAMEWORKS FOR  
HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES**

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## **AN ANALYSIS OF FRAMEWORKS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES**

### Introduction

The policy process requires tools to understand its complex, changing environment, variety of actors, and institutional factors at multiple levels (Sabatier, 1999). Theoretical frameworks are tools used to examine various aspects of the policy process. The conceptual framework and methodological approach used in conducting policy research reflect assumptions about the observed world (Heck, 2004). Frameworks' conceptual basis and methodological design may vary (Boyd, 1988), yet each brings particular aspects of the policy world to light, leaving other facets in the shadows (Rhoads, Szenz, & Carducci, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the frameworks frequently used in policy analysis. The paper will explain various components of the frameworks and their usefulness for studying higher education policy problems. The goal is not to assert one policy framework as superior over another, but to review the frameworks and provide a higher education policy study scenario for each framework. While there are works which review the policy research literature, few consider these theories in particular. For instance, McClendon (2003) reviews policy literature in four areas: principal-agent theory; policy process theory; policy innovation and diffusion theory; and comparative state political systems theories. In this review, we consider policy process theories at length, with a special focus on their utility for the higher education policy arena at the institutional, state, or national level. We agree with McClendon that little research has occurred utilizing sophisticated policy theory frameworks in higher education policy research and we concur with his call for more advanced, analytical studies which go deeper than anecdotal case studies.

### Policy Studies

Policy studies, encompassing the study of the policy process and conducted for the purpose of informing both policy and practice, may include policy analysis—the breaking up “of a policy problem into its component parts, understanding them, and developing solutions” (Coring, 1995, p. 4). Policy studies are comprehensive and are undertaken to “gain greater basic understanding of political behavior and the governmental process” (Coring, 1995, p. 13).

Typical studies of policy focus on understanding the benefits and costs of policy choices in light of specific goals, constraints, and environmental conditions (Heck, 2004). Broadly speaking, policy studies are approached in three main ways: 1) policy development; 2) policy implementation; and 3) policy assessment or evaluation (Heck, 2004).

Studies of policy development and decision making focus on understanding the dynamics of the development and movement of ideas into formal government decision-making arenas. Policy implementation studies examine the environmental conditions; policy-related variables; and supports and barriers that enhance or hinder policy implementation. Finally, policy evaluation studies assess or evaluate the impact of policy once incorporated into practice. This approach seeks to understand the extent to which the policy reaches its goals, including the consideration of the benefits and costs of policy options (Heck, 2004).

Some of the analytic approaches for higher education policy studies focus on the key choices involved with maintenance of a higher education system such as the size of the system, to include the number of institutions; the structure of the system; the geographic distribution of institutions, and their alignment with economic concerns. Other higher education system concerns are admissions requirements; governance structures; and the orientation of the curriculum to account for applied or basic research (Premfors, 1992, p. 1911). Higher education

policy analysis allows for an understanding of the intended and unintended effects of policy decisions over a higher education system. A policy study will typically focus on a stage or stages of the policy process and may have a goal of understanding its development, implementation, and impact. The choice of framework is influenced by certain considerations, or variables, that surround the policy study.

### Policy Studies Considerations

Policy studies may examine certain elements of policymaking, such as governance, leadership, or legislative arrangements. The research goal of the policy study, as well as the state, country, or higher education system's characteristics determine the framework best suited for conducting that research. What follows are primary considerations for framework suitability.

*Policy Environment.* It is important to consider the contextual elements surrounding the research arena. Within a particular policy domain, such as higher education, there are a variety of institutions and multiple levels of government with oversight and concern for higher education. The scholar must decide at which level the analysis will focus: national/federal; state/provincial; or institutional/school/departmental.

The legislative system (parliamentary or bicameral) or governance of the higher education system impacts who (actors) is involved in the policy process, the level of consensus needed for change to occur, and the amount of change possible through policymaking. In a federalist system, for example, decision making is distributed between a central government and subdivisional governments. The nature and structure of the system influences policymakers' interactions, their actions in addressing policy issues, and their ability to instigate change through policymaking. The type of governance arrangement is an important consideration for the policy

researcher. Student access to higher education and higher education's contribution to economic development are also important elements to the researcher.

While this paper focuses mainly on policy frameworks which emerged from studies of developed countries, they are not always suitable for studies in all countries. For example, Thomas and Grindle (1990) offer a framework for policy studies that looks at "how reformist initiatives get on the agenda for government action, what factors influence decision-makers, and the linkages between agenda setting and decision-making process" (1990, p. 1163). While their framework is intended to be used for a general policy context it is emergent and represents an attempt to explain policymaking in developing countries. Their work seeks to provide an alternate understanding of why reforms in developing countries often fail. Too often reform failure is explained by lack of political will, but Thomas and Grindle's framework offers a way for developing country policymakers to understand the complexities behind reform and to carefully evaluate whether a proposed reform will stand a reasonable chance of implementation, especially giving consideration to elected officials' capacity to adapt to shifting public priorities. More recently, policy theorists have developed frameworks to explain policy activities in emerging democracies such as South Africa (Cloete et al., 2002) and developing African countries (Porter & Hicks, 1995). Others have developed frameworks which focus on the performance of a higher education system, considering the state or nation's history, culture, and economy, as well as its capacity to adapt and be "responsive to public priorities" (Richardson, 2004, p. 11). The performance of a higher education system, along with its adaptive capacity, is analyzed from the perspective of the policy rules operating said system.

*Treatment of the Actor.* Another consideration for policy research is the treatment of the actor.

The policymaker or decision-maker within the policymaking arena is considered an actor, but the

framework may or may not allot certain qualities to the actor who seeks to influence policy. Traditional policy studies viewed the actor from the political economy perspective, which assumed the actor's behavior was guided by weighing costs and benefits and using information in a rational way to maximize material self interest (Ostrom, 1999). Such an actor used information as a tool to ensure beneficial economic outcomes for the self. Rarely has weight been given to the actor's values; beliefs; resources; information; information-processing capabilities; or the "internal mechanisms they use to decide upon strategies" (Ostrom, 1999, p. 44). A framework's treatment of the actor's motivations, values, or decision-making process may influence a researcher's choice of framework. A researcher may wish to consider individual actors or actors who coalesce into groups.

*Time considerations.* Understanding the outcomes and effects of specific policies can take a considerable amount of time, depending on the specific policy issue. Major policy issues may take several decades to unfold and "for problems and policy issues to emerge, debates to ensue, and policy to be formulated, implemented, and its effects noted" (Heck, 2004, p. 115). Policy may be best understood by examining events as they unfold over time, and some frameworks are more suitable for this type of analysis. Some studies' research problems may not require much time to generate results. A challenge of policy studies is that a policy takes time to trickle through implementation and policy actors are impatient to know the outcome of a given policy's effect.

*Research questions.* The policy researcher chooses the framework which best suits the policy research question. Some research has examined the effect of admissions policies on underrepresented groups. Other research has looked at policy and its affect on college graduation rates. Research that questions such cause and affect policies may tend to be

quantitative analysis of data gathered over time regarding populations of students; tuition rates; operational funding to institutions; and per capita expenditures for higher education. Research may examine a particular policy that was put in place at the state level, such as the effect of the George Hope Scholarships (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2002). Other research may examine the impact of substantial policy changes on a university system, for example, the end of remediation in the City University of New York System (Parker, 2005). The higher education policy research field needs studies with greater rigor, utilizing more mixed research methods (McLendon, 2003).

#### *Frameworks, Theories, and Models*

Ostrom (1999) differentiates between frameworks, theories, and models for use in policy studies. Frameworks explain how different variables may be interrelated and provide a common language that can be used to compare variables such as conditions, actions, and outcomes across a number of different situations, helping policy analysts to identify those variables at play during analysis. While frameworks “can be useful representations of reality, they are not the phenomenon itself” (Heck, 2004, p. 57). Rather, they are based on assumptions about important relational aspects of the phenomenon under study and are useful for identifying major types of concepts and propositions that affect policy activity and the scope of inquiry (Ostrom, 1999). They help to organize analysis and inquiry, but they do not provide explanations for actions and outcomes. They can, however, encourage the development of theory at a later point (Schlager, 1999).

Theories and models examine specific aspects of a framework by positing relationships among a limited number of key variables and attempting to make predictions about policy outcomes. Related to frameworks, theories identify those elements that have particular relevance

for answering questions focused on diagnosing phenomena, explaining processes and suggesting outcomes. A model is distinct from a framework and theory because it makes precise assumptions about variables that relate to a specific set of outcomes (Ostrom, 1999). “Several different theories are usually compatible with a particular type of research framework. Theories are like the staging of action within the play (or framework). Again, the researcher, as director, makes decisions about which actors are relatively more important in the scene, and which ones should remain in the background” (Heck, 2004, p. 58). The researcher, again, makes decisions about framework, model, or theory, based on the research goal and the policy study’s considerations such as environment, actor, and time. This next section highlights some frameworks useful for policy studies.

#### Discussion of Frameworks

Six prominent frameworks used in policy analysis will be examined in this paper. The frameworks are discussed with a focus on analyzing their strengths and limitations for understanding higher education policy. The frameworks are: 1) The Policy Stages Approach/Heuristic; 2) Easton’s Systems Analysis Framework; 3) Multiple Streams Framework; 4) Advocacy Coalition Framework; 5) Punctuated-Equilibrium; and 6) Institutional Analysis and Development Framework. We do not consider the very useful and highly utilized Clark (1983) framework for understanding the relationship between the state, the higher education market, and the higher education institutions, termed “oligarchy.” Although the Clark triangular model of state, market, and oligarchy, evolved from this and other frameworks considered in this paper, it has received considerable treatment through higher education policy studies.

These are mostly rational models, meaning the actors involved make rational decisions based on a linear understanding of the policy process, with policy occurring in a step-by-step

manner (Anderson, 1997). However, these frameworks do not always provide insight into the cultural factors that shape policymaking. The frameworks were selected because they continue to be frequently used in policy analysis and they encompass several concepts used in emergent frameworks. For instance, a post structural approach examines policy as text and policy as discourse (Ball, 1994). Analyzing policy text means decoding and interpreting policy text for power relations through dialogue, language, and conversation. Analyzing policy discourse looks at “who can speak, when, where and with what authority” (Ball, 1994, p. 21), attempting to make explicit the implicit values and ideologies in discourses. It aims to depoliticize them and strip them of their value-laden terminology (Sutton, 1999, p. 6). Other policy literature, for instance, political systems theory allows for a focus on inputs—such as demands for change—and outputs, such as authoritative decisions (Campbell & Mazzoni, 1976). Chubb and Peterson (1989) look at policymaking with a structural choice framework where “the struggles of genuine consequence [are] about bureaucratic arrangements, about powers and procedures and criteria” (p. 323). More recent analyses use cultural paradigms to describe how certain values underlie the policy process (Marshall, Mitchell, & Wirt, 1989). Using critical, postmodern, or feminist theories, cultural approaches view policymaking as a socially constructed activity. The research goal is to illuminate relationships among power, culture, and language that underlie policies which marginalize people primarily on the basis of race, gender, and social class (Marshall, 1997; Tillman, 2002). These frameworks contribute to the literature on policymaking and assist the researcher to make sense of a specific (or many) policy arena(s). Again, this paper focuses on prominent frameworks which attempt to incorporate some cultural factors as variables, but they are not heavily considered.

The policy theories we consider evolved from the work of certain theorists who sought to understand specific processes in detail. For instance, Weiss closely examined the information seeking practices of policymakers. In 1977, Weiss looked at the use of social research for policymaking, in the fashion of Kingdon and Anderson. She first clarified that the use of social research for policymaking assumed linear policymaking. In other words, social research is used in a sequential manner in a rational decision-making process, which Kingdon and Anderson's work assumed. In "Social Science Research and Decision-Making" (1980), Weiss and Bucuvalas seek to learn what the characteristics are of social science research that makes it useful for decision-makers. Weiss and Bucuvalas develop a definition for "useful:" research that "makes a substantive contribution and/or is likely to be considered" (214). Weiss and Bucuvalas found that primary considerations in usefulness were research quality, implementability of recommendations, conformity of the research to user expectations, and the level of challenge to the status quo the research proposes. Though this research focused on what decision-makers *say* they do and not necessarily what they actually *do*, the conclusion of this study was that there are characteristics of research which can be important predictors of usefulness, especially in the domain of research quality.

Weiss also discovered that sometimes research was not used due to perceived weaknesses in the research, conflicting demands of policy, and a disjunction between the knowledge needs of policymakers and research outputs (Weiss, 1977). Research is often "flawed, inconclusive, ambiguous, and contradicted by evidence from other studies" (p. 532-3). In addition, the policymaker is exposed to informal and diverse settings and multiple information sources. Therefore, the policymaker may not know the source of an idea. Weiss wrote, "This kind of diffuse, undirected seepage of social research into the policy sphere can gradually change the

whole focus of debate over policy issues" (p. 534). Weiss emphasized that research usability factors include the realization that "decision-makers often consider enlightenment to be a mode of research utilization" (p. 543). Research enters the world of the decision-maker both formally and informally and may simply "enlighten" the policymaker.

In the piece "Haphazard Connection: Social Science and Public Policy" (1995) Weiss modified her definition of "research use" to include the "circuitous ways research findings come into circulation and ideas from research percolate into the policy arena." Her definition included a "broader notion of conceptual use" (p. 141). This study moved a step further to delineate the characteristics, or variables that make research more likely to be used. They are: the relevance of the study to the decision-maker's own work; the conformity of the knowledge with the prior knowledge, experience, and beliefs of the decision-maker; the research quality; the orientation of the research to policy action; the challenge the research poses to current policy; whether the study is believable, and whether the research gives the decision-maker something to do. The weight of the importance of each of these variables depends on the context/situation of the decision-maker as well as the decision-maker's power and ability to actually implement policy. In addition to the variables that influence the perceived usefulness of research, Weiss summarized previous studies regarding research dissemination practices or routes for dissemination. These practices also influence the perceived usefulness of research: the face-to-face contact between researcher and potential user; the two-way interaction in which the researcher listens as well as talks; or a sustained discussion over a fairly long period of time. Weiss found that effective research dissemination occurs through mass media, think tanks, consultants, interest groups, and the "issue network." All these modes add up to an informal delivery of research (Weiss, 1995) and affect the perceived usefulness of the research.

Weiss' research about the circuitous routes of information might take to eventually "enlighten" a policymaker influenced policy researchers in two ways. The first was that rational decision-making, including a linear process of information-collecting and enlightened decision-making reflected an assumption about a rational policymaking process. The second was that a policymaker might eventually learn or become "enlightened" by research or information, but not in a causal manner. These two ways of thinking about information and policymaking are picked up in Sabatier's policymaking framework, as well as in the other theories examined herein. There is a clear complement to these theories as they all build off each other's research and those previous, such as Anderson (1997) and Schattschneider (1975).

#### The Policy Stages Heuristic

Anderson (1997) developed Kingdon's simple stages of decisions by focusing more in depth on the stages involved in policymaking. He believed public policy needed to be studied "in order to gain greater knowledge about its origins, the processes by which it is developed, and its consequences for society" (p. 175). He saw that studies could focus on the political and environmental factors that shape policy, or on the impact policy has on the policy environment and policy system. Anderson defined policy as "a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern" (p. 172). By focusing on the stages of the policy process, policy studies emerged along this "purposive course of action."

The course of action, or stages are: a) structuring of the policy problem; b) assessment of a set of policy alternatives; c) formation of policy recommendations; d) formal decision-taking; e) policy implementation; f) policy evaluation; and g) feedback" (Premfors, 1992). Thus, distinctions arose between the stages of policy formation, implementation, and evaluation. As

would be expected, researchers could examine a stage such as the feedback or evaluation stage and produce interesting studies of that particular stage. One prominent focus of research during the 1980s was the study of various policy implementation attempts.

The stages approach to policy analysis involves the identification of an ordered sequence of stages or steps to a specific policy's development and eventual implementation. Also called the "linear model," it is one of the most influential frameworks for understanding the policy process, particularly among American scholars (Sabatier, 1999). The framework identifies policy stages, namely policy initiation, examination, selection, implementation, and continuation or elimination.

Stemming from Lasswell (1951), who viewed the decision-making process as a series of several identifiable steps, the framework is useful because it enables the researcher to conduct descriptive studies of individual phases of the policy process. Studies utilizing this approach focus on one stage at a time, typically agenda setting, policy formation and legitimization, implementation, and evaluation. Several researchers have further developed this framework (Jones, 1970; Anderson, 1975; Brewer & deLeon, 1983, deLeon, 1999).

The policy stages framework allowed for examination of distinct decision-making moments. However, with implementation studies, researchers could focus on how "different ways of organizing public administration affect the prospects for carrying out programs successfully" (Rothstein, 1988, p. 8). In effect, analyzing and following a policy through its implementation could help policy makers learn how to better craft policy (Gornitzka, Kyvik, & Stensaker, 2002). If policy were crafted appropriately from the "top," by a policymaker, one could ensure its successful implementation at the "bottom" once it became law. Thus the term "top-down implementation studies" was coined to capture that hierarchical top-down notion of

implementation. Another way to approach implementation studies was from the “bottom-up,” taking into consideration the actors, context, and the actual policy vehicle—tax, law, or regulation—involved in implementation (Sabatier, 1986).

Through the 1980s policy researchers predominantly used top-down or bottom-up implementation frameworks for policy studies, especially to evaluate the Great Society federal programs (Rothstein, 1988). These studies, however, often neglected the policy’s social, political, economic, historic, or cultural context. The “text book approach” (Nakamura, 1987), or “stages heuristic” (Sabatier, 1999) holds several disadvantages, outlined by Sabatier:

1. The stages are not causal and evolve individually and isolated.
2. Stages, though descriptively or conceptually helpful, is inaccurate in its portrayal of the policy process.
3. Even in bottom up studies, the stages imply top-down hierarchical policy evolution.
4. The approach oversimplifies the “usual process of *multiple, interacting cycles* involving numerous policy proposals and statutes at multiple levels of government” (Sabatier, 1999, p. 7).

In the end, the “distinction between policy formulation and policy implementation is misleading and/or useless” (Sabatier, 1998, p. 31). Implementation studies produced “rather myopic and detailed case studies with limited theoretical ambitions” and “laundry lists” of characteristics of successfully implemented policies (Rothstein, 1988, p. 8). Implementation studies concluded with a sense that resources had been wasted and bureaucrats were unaware of the proper objectives and organizational arrangements needed for efficient, cost-effective programs and policies. However, for a long time, the implementation studies served the purpose for understanding policy’s effects over time. Implementation utilization and subsequent

shortcomings led to a need for theories that described the policymaking process in different ways.

#### Easton's Systems Analysis Framework

Easton's (1965a) systems framework was a prominent conceptual lens used in the 1970s and 1980s and responded to the need for more empirical research in the social sciences. When the systems framework was introduced, the social science field was heavily influenced by the biological sciences. The "hard sciences" placed greater emphasis on empirical theory, and the framework was an attempt to apply scientific theory about system organization and operation to explain human behavior. In a similar way that the cells of the human body were examined as a system, researchers began analyzing small groups, whole institutions, and societies as systems themselves (Easton, 1965a, p. 13 - 16). Through the systems framework, Easton provides a method to describe policy activity at a level of analysis far enough removed to understand the variables within a social system, the interactions that take place within the system (among both individuals and groups), and the environment in which the system is located. The framework describes how environmental demands and stresses become policy inputs that are converted within the policy system into policy outputs that are fed back into the environment.

Systems analysis, used in policy analysis, is built on four general premises, with the last two premises, according to Easton, distinguishing the framework from other approaches to the study of policy. The first premise is to view political life as a system of behavior. The second premise is that the system is distinguishable from the environment in which it exists, yet open to influences from it. The third premise is that variations in the structures and processes within a system may be alternate efforts by members of a system to regulate or cope with environmental and internal stresses. The fourth premise is that the capacity of a system to persist under stress is

a function of the presence and nature of information and other influences that return to the system's actors and decision-makers (Easton, 1979, p. 24 – 25).

In systems analysis, the structure of the system comes secondary to identifying the interactions that take place within the system (Easton, 1979). With a framework that takes into consideration the environment, various inputs, and environmental stresses, political phenomena constitute an open system—one that must cope with the problems generated by its exposure to influences from its external environment. The systems framework provides an explanation for the policy system's persistence over time, its self-regulation, and its ability to adapt through time to changing environmental conditions.

### *Limitations*

There are several limitations to using the systems framework. For instance, although the various components of the political system are identified and described, the framework says less about causal processes and connections. The framework was an attempt to produce more empirical work in educational policy, but the concepts, interrelationships, and causal connections of the framework are not well developed. Because the framework says little about causal relationships, the framework is not as useful in examining the developmental process of particular policies and how environmental demands are actually converted to policies.

In addition, the unit of analysis is the policy system at the macro level, so the framework is less useful for examining individual variability (Heck, 2004). Furthermore, Easton's discussion of the political system tends to describe a democratic political model, making it difficult to use the framework to conduct analyses of policies with different types of regimes or various levels of democracy.

Because Easton's framework looks at systems, it leans toward a mechanical, black box view of politics. The framework orders the policy process into steps and ignores the role of actors and interest groups involved, and leaves little room for the role of variables external to the system.

### Multiple Streams Framework

One important consideration lacking in the systems analysis framework was the role of actors, interest groups, and organizations. The multiple streams (MS) framework, on the other hand, places central importance on the role of actors, particularly in the agenda setting process. In addition, departing from Easton's model, MS focuses on the process of transforming inputs, such as information, into policy outputs. The framework examines policy choice and provides insight into policymakers' rationing of attention; the framing of issues; and the search for solutions (Zahariadis, 1999, p. 73).

At the time the MS framework was being developed, policy research focused more on the final enactment of legislation, but the processes that occurred prior to policy decisions were less understood. As Kingdon (1995) explains, "We know more about how issues are disposed of than we know about how they came to be issues on the governmental agenda in the first place, how the alternatives from which decision makers chose were generated, and why some potential issues and some likely alternatives never came to be the focus of serious attention" (p. 1).

An extensive amount of research was conducted to develop the framework. Concentrating on the areas of health and transportation in the federal government of the United States, Kingdon conducted 247 interviews in and outside of government over four years. By conducting the interviews over four years, Kingdon was able to compare one year to the next. If

a previously important item fell of the agenda or a new item arose, he probed into understanding why the subject faded (1995, p. 5).

Kingdon (1984) adapted the garbage can model of choice developed by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972). The garbage can model of choice describes educational decision making as a “garbage can” with uncertain goals, fluid participation, unclear technology, and uncertain outcomes. Unlike rational models of organizational decision making, educational decision makers may not act on the basis of carefully sought out preferences, but rather discover their preferences through policy making (Heck, 2004). Kingdon applies these ideas from the garbage can model to determine why some agenda items are prominent and others are not. In an organized anarchy, with conditions of ambiguity and a definition of the problem vague or changing, the MS approach provides a way to examine how individuals’ decision making is an attempt to make sense of problems as they are presented. Kingdon takes the notion further and applies this to agenda setting and alternative specification. The term, “agenda” is described as the “list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time” (Kingdon, 1984, p. 3). Therefore, the agenda-setting process narrows the set of possible policy subjects or issues that actually becomes the focus of attention.

In addition to the agenda items, governmental officials and their associates consider a set of “alternatives.” Some alternatives are weighed more seriously than others and the process of specifying alternatives narrows the set that is seriously considered (Kingdon, 1984). While much of the policy literature does not draw sharp distinctions between agenda setting and the finding of alternatives, Kingdon (1984) explains that a differentiation between the two is important because each is governed by different processes and involves differing roles for the policy actors.

In addition to allowing for analysis of the predecision processes in the U.S., the framework can also be used in comparative policy studies. While specific aspects of individuals' participation in the policy process may vary in different contexts, Zahariadis (1995) demonstrated that the MS framework is still applicable in contexts outside of the U.S.

Kingdon (1984) identified three streams flowing through the system – problems, policies, and politics. Each has its own rules and dynamics in the agenda setting process.

*The Problem Stream.* Problems constitute the first stream. In order to understand how some issues are recognized as significant while other issues are not, one looks at the manner individuals learn about problems and their definition. Sometimes a problem is systematically on the radar screen, while at other times a dramatic event, feedback from the operation of an existing program, seizes attention (Kingdon, 1984). In short, there are three ways to identify what becomes defined as problems, through certain indicators; dramatic events, crises, or symbols; and feedback from existing programs.

*Indicators.* Problems may come to the attention of decision makers because there is an indicator highlighting a problem. For example, the *Measuring Up* report card uses indicators to assess and compare higher education performance on a state-by-state basis (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2005). The indicators may highlight a problem, such as low college attendance-going rates. Indicators are not used primarily to determine whether a given problem exists. “Rather, decision makers and those who work close to them use indicators in two main ways: to assess the magnitude of a problem and to become aware of changes in the problem” (Kingdon, 1984, p. 96).

*Events and Crises.* When problems are not self-evident through indicators, they may receive more attention when a focusing event such as a crisis or disaster event occurs. Another

variation on the focusing event is the emergence and diffusion of a powerful symbol. A symbol could be the passage of a significant piece of legislation. For example, the passage of Proposition 209, the legislation that outlawed affirmative action for women and minorities, although enacted in California, reverberated through the entire higher education community. Such an event leaves certain problems more prominent than others.

*Feedback.* Feedback often brings problems to the attention of decision makers, particularly programs that are not working as planned, new problems that have arisen as a result of a program's enactment, or unanticipated consequences that must be fixed. Feedback can come to officials and decision makers formally (i.e., evaluations) and informally (i.e., complaints). A problem is also highlighted when an initiative fails to meet its stated goals or when programs become so costly that decision makers are forced to rethink future plans (Kingdon, 1984).

### *The Policy Stream*

The second stream includes a variety of ideas floating around in what is called the policy primeval soup:

Much as molecules floated around in what biologists call the 'primeval soup' before life came into being, so ideas float around in these [policy] communities...While many ideas float around in this policy primeval soup, the ones that last, as in a natural selection system, meet some criteria. Some ideas survive and prosper; some proposals are taken more seriously than others (Kingdon, 1984, p. 123).

The ideas that float around are generated by specialists, including individuals in a given policy arena in and outside government. The proposed ideas are utilized in various ways. Although there are a large number of ideas floating around, only a few ever receive serious consideration. Selection criteria for ideas include technical feasibility and value acceptability.

Proposals that are or appear difficult to implement, or do not conform to the values of policymakers, are less likely to be considered for adoption (Zahariadis, 1999).

### *The Political Stream*

The third stream is called the political stream and consists of the national mood; pressure group campaigns; and administrative or legislative turnover.

*National mood.* A fairly large number of individuals are thinking along certain common lines, reflecting a national mood. This national mood can change in discernible ways, which can have important impacts on policy agendas and policy outcomes (Kingdon, 1984. p. 153). The national mood can create the "fertile ground" for a policy's promotion or it can slow a policy down. Politicians and decision makers can gain a sense of the national mood through communication with community members or discussions with other decision makers.

*Pressure group campaigns.* The organized political forces are interest groups, political mobilizers, and political elites, who all influence policy. When an issue is supported or leaders lean in favor of an issue, the policy can become more prominent on the agenda. If all interest groups are voicing their support for a proposed issue, the item is more likely to reach the agenda faster than an issue with conflicting views. Often the determining factor in a policy's lifespan is its opponents and proponents and the level of adamancy about the issue. While the determination of the balance and support of issues is somewhat imprecise, it is possible to determine who is on which side and which side has greater strength (Kingdon, 1984). One example is governmental programs that have groups of supporters who will defend them. Politicians must consider the consequences they would face if they wish to go against a powerful interest group.

*Legislative turnover.* In addition to changes in national mood and the balance of organized political forces, the composition of individuals within government is a third major component of the political stream. Although Kingdon speaks of government officials, the concepts can be applied to understanding the turnover of key personnel in any policy environment. The turnover of key decision makers produces new agenda items and makes it difficult to consider items that may have previously been on the agenda. One of the most powerful turnover effects is a change of administration. “At the time of a change of administration, people all over town hold their breath in anticipation, waiting to see what the new administration’s priorities will be, what its policy agendas will look like” (Kingdon, 1984, p. 161).

*Coupling of streams and policy windows*

According to Zahariadis (1999), the combination of the national mood and turnover in government, exerts the most powerful effect on agendas. This concept, termed coupling, occurs when the streams are joined together at critical moments in time. Kingdon (1984) labels these usual brief moments as “policy windows” which present unique opportunities for policy entrepreneurs, those actors who see a policy window open and seize the opportunity, initiating action. In this way, policy entrepreneurs may couple streams together. Policy entrepreneurs “advocate for proposals” and their defining characteristic “much in the case of a business entrepreneur, is their willingness to invest their resources – time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money – in the hope of a future return” (Zahariadis, 1999, p. 129). These entrepreneurs advocate to promote their personal interests, solve a problem, and shape public policy according to their values. Policy entrepreneurs must not only be persistent but also skilled

at coupling – able to attach problems to solutions and find individuals receptive to their ideas (Zahariadis, 1999).

### *Limitations*

Kingdon (1984) describes each stream as each having a life of its own, with its own rules and dynamics, with stream interaction only during open windows when policy entrepreneurs intervene. However, some disagree with the notion of independent streams. Mucciaroni (1992) contends that streams are more “interdependent,” with one stream triggering or reinforcing changes in another. Mucciaroni’s points to a need to consider how new views or issues enter the policy process when there are no policy windows.

Another concern of the MS framework relates to the concept of incrementalism (Mucciaroni, 1992). While Kingdon (1984) contends that agenda change is discontinuous and non-incremental, the generating of alternatives in the policy stream is incremental. For example, Kingdon explains “those who advocate major changes find they often must push for one small part at a time to move in their preferred direction” (p. 84). He further elaborates that when policymakers consider the alternatives from which they will choose, they repair the ideas and approaches with which they are already familiar, suggesting a recombination of old ideas. Critics argue that the process of generating alternatives is not quite as simplistic as described in the MS framework. Lastly, policy streams may not be evident through Kingdon’s indicators. Some problems may lurk outside the policy system and evolve over time. Alternatively, an indicator may exist but it may not show a hidden policy problem. Therefore, the MS framework is more of a heuristic device rather than a tool for conducting empirical research (King, 1985).

### Punctuated-Equilibrium Theory

The Punctuated-Equilibrium (PE) theory is concerned with explaining how policy processes, which are driven by a logic of stability and incrementalism, occasionally produce large-scale departures from the past (Schattschneider, 1960; True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 1999). Recognizing that both stability and change are important elements of the policy process, the PE theory is useful because it aims to understand both stability and change, rather than focusing on one or the other (True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 1999).

Interestingly, the concept of PE was first advanced by biologists as an explanation for speciation (or variations in development) among organisms (Gould & Eldridge, 1977). Rather than characterizing evolution as a slow and steady process, PE contends that evolution and speciation can be better explained with long periods of standstill or equilibrium with punctuations of large-scale replacements or extinctions of species.

PE emphasizes the dynamics of two parts of the process leading up to governmental policy decisions: issue definition and agenda setting. “As issues are defined in public discourse in different ways, and as issues rise and fall in the public agenda, existing policies can be either reinforced or questioned” (True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 1999, p. 98). Reinforcement tends to create small incremental changes, while constant questioning creates opportunities for dramatic changes in policy. The reasoning for this is quite simple: the national political system often favors the status quo; major change requires extraordinary effort (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993).

Building upon the seminal work of Schattschneider (1975) who was one of the first to examine the difficulty for disfavored groups and new ideas to enter the established system of policymaking, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) analyzed a number of policymaking cases over time within a variety of issue areas and found: 1) policymaking simultaneously makes leaps and

undergoes periods of near stasis as issues emerge and recede from the public agenda; 2) the tendency toward punctuated equilibria is exacerbated by American political institutions; and 3) policy images play an important role in expanding issues beyond the control of the specialists and special interests that serve as policy insiders or monopolies.

### *Political Conflict*

Political conflict is at the center of PE theory. Conflicts represent debates over ideology and values. There are four dimensions that shape conflict. The first dimension is understanding the scope of those involved in the conflict. Second is the visibility of the conflict, with some issues drawing more attention than others (i.e., the economy). The third dimension is the intensity of some conflicts, with some fought more intensely. The fourth dimension is the direction of the conflict which can divide people into different factions, parties, or other subgroups (Schattschneider, 1975).

The PE theory places significant importance on examination of both the institutional structures and the agenda setting process as foundations for understanding how policy is developed. Depending on the institution or political system, various issues are treated differently. Some decision structures are capable of handling many issues simultaneously while other structures can handle only one issue at a time (Simon, 1985; Jones, 1994). Only a few issues can remain on the macropolitical agenda; typically, political issues are dispersed to various issues-oriented policy subsystems. Within these subsystems, the issues are generally processed in a more incremental fashion. As a result, some systems become dominated by a single interest (a policy monopoly) while others experience competition among several interests. Sometimes this monopoly can thrive over a certain period of time and then collapse, while at other times the decentralized nature of the system reinforces the impetus for policy change (Heck, 2004, p. 108).

To encourage changes in policy, mobilization is required to set proposals for change in motion. In contrast to incremental policy activities, “it takes considerable conflict, commitment, strategy, and effort toward mobilization for major policy changes to take place” (Heck, 2004, p. 104). While these mobilizations tend to occur periodically, once they are initiated they can produce large-scale changes in policy. Once a mobilization is under way, “the diffuse jurisdictional boundaries that separate the various overlapping institutions of government can allow many governmental actors to become involved in a new policy area” (True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 1999, p. 99). Despite the size and complexity of the U.S. government, these bursts that interrupt the policy process keep government as a complex, interactive system, instead of a “gridlocked Leviathan” (True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 1999). Changes in U.S. policy cannot be described as bursts or punctuations because policy changes have occurred in various ways. Instead, by understanding these *incidents* that spark large change, PE theory offers a way to understand the lead up to changes, as well as to predict how the initiated changes might unfold. Further, PE theory provides a way of understanding why some changes are incremental and others are punctuated. Major policy changes may result when one or more policy subsystems is disrupted and a new program or agency is created (True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 1999).

### *Limitations*

The PE theory is concerned largely with major policy changes. For this reason, at least one decade and often two is required to understand how policy problems emerge, how policy problems are debated, and how policy recommendations are developed and implemented. In addition, time is required to understand the outcomes of policy decisions. Therefore, the PE theory is most useful in explaining processes in hindsight and during periods of equilibrium when a policy issue has been resolved.

The PE theory does not clearly define the difference between major and more routine policy change. For this reason, the PE theory may be more useful for understanding the system as a whole, as opposed to assessing the impact of specific policies (Heck, 2004).

#### The Advocacy Coalition Framework

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) emerged out of a search for an alternate policy study approach to the stages approach. It integrates top-down and bottom-up policy implementation and incorporates technical information (i.e., empirical research) into understanding the policy process (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999). The basic assumption of the ACF is that the policy subsystem is where policy making occurs and actors in that subsystem hold core beliefs which influence their policymaking. The ACF challenges the assumption that a policy actor's organizational affiliation is key to understanding policy behavior and suggests that coalitions are formed among actors across different organizations with share similar core policy values, perceptions of policy problems, and ultimate policy goals. Furthermore, the framework is oriented towards examining hypotheses across different cases and settings. The framework identifies several key variables that influence policy change (i.e. interaction of opposing advocacy coalitions operating within a policy subsystem).

The initial version of the ACF was outlined in 1987-1988, and later was revised in 1993 (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). With a number of studies applying the ACF framework (at least 34 were counted in 1999), several scholars have critically examined the components of the framework and its assumptions (Capano, 1996; Cashore, 2003; Dowding, 1995; Dudley, Parsons, Radaelli, & Sabatier, 2000; Elliott & Schlaepfer, 2001; Ellison, 1998a, 1998b; Heck, 2004; Howlett & Ramesh, 1998; Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994; John, 2003; Radaelli, 1995; Sabatier, 1987; Sato, 1999; Schlager, 1995; Schlager & Blomquist, 1996; Weyant, 1988; Zafonte &

Sabatier, 1998). In their most recent work assessing the ACF, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999) consider suggestions from other researchers who have used the framework and suggested refinements.

There are five premises underlying the ACF. The first premise concerns the role of technical information in the decision making process. The ACF contends that the availability and use of technical information is important to the policy development process. Information is used by groups to influence the agenda setting and legislative processes. The ACF emphasizes policy learning within policy subsystems, which involves the use of information to gain new understanding of policy alternatives (Sabatier, 1993; Heck, 2004).

The second premise is that for policy studies, a time perspective of a decade or more is required in order to evaluate the impact of a policy within a complete change cycle, as well as to allow for policy learning (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999).

The third premise is that a policy subsystem, which consists of individuals from a variety of public and private institutions, is the unit of analysis. The subsystem is not a specific governmental institution but is a collection of actors from a variety of organizations who are concerned with a policy problem. In the subsystem “there are usually a multitude of programs initiated at different levels of government that local actors seek to utilize in pursuit of their own goals” (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999).

The fourth premise is that policy subsystems are comprised of a considerable number of policy actors from multiple levels, including actors from think tanks, legislative associations, journalists, policy analysts, institutional and government leaders, and policy researchers.

The fifth premise is that policies and programs incorporate beliefs and theories about how to achieve policy objectives. These beliefs involve value priorities, perceptions of causal

relationships, and the magnitude of the policy problem, leading to actors' approach to policy solutions.

Shared beliefs by a group of people are more important than institutional norms and values when examining policy behavior. Therefore, three sets of variables influence policy change. At the highest or broadest level are the "deep core" beliefs of the shared belief system, which includes basic ontological and normative beliefs. At the next level are "policy core" beliefs, a coalition's basic normative commitments and causal perceptions across an entire policy subsystem. These perceptions include the beliefs concerning the seriousness of a problem, the principal causes of the problem, and the strategies for realizing core values within the subsystem. Finally, the "secondary beliefs" are relatively susceptible to change because these beliefs may not be entirely shared within the subsystem (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999).

Policy change is a function of three sets of processes (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). The first concerns the interactions of competing advocacy coalitions within a policy subsystem. An advocacy coalition seeks to manipulate the policies, budgets, or personnel of governmental institutions in order to achieve goals over time (1993, p. 5). The second set of processes concerns changes external to the system, such as socioeconomic changes, changes in public opinion, system-wide governing coalitions, or output from other subsystems that provide opportunities and obstacles to the competing coalitions. The third set involves stable system parameters (i.e. social structure and constitutional rules) and their concomitant constraints and resources on the subsystem actors.

Technical information is important because the use of information can influence an advocacy coalition's perception of current conditions or change possibilities and alternatives within a subsystem. Information aids with policy-oriented learning, which involves "increased

knowledge of problem parameters and the factors that affect them, the internal feedback loops...concerning policy effectiveness, and changing perceptions of the probable impacts of alternative policies” (1999, p. 123). Therefore, policy-oriented learning results when coalitions modify thought or behavior based on new information or experience. The ACF considers this type of learning to be instrumental for eventual policy change.

#### *Hypotheses of the ACF*

Sabatier proposed hypotheses about advocacy coalitions, policy change, and policy learning (which can lead to change). Altogether there are about fifteen newly-modified hypotheses stating, for instance, that “Actors who share policy core beliefs are more likely to engage in short-term coordination if they view their opponents as very powerful and very likely to impose substantial costs upon them if victorious” (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999). Another hypothesis states that “policy oriented learning across belief systems is most likely when there exists a forum that is prestigious enough to force professionals from different coalitions to participate and is dominated by professional norms” (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999).

The ACF is a useful conceptual framework, especially because it proposes hypotheses across a variety of different types of policy cases and settings (Heck, 2004). It helps to identify key variables that influence policy change, taking into consideration the role of actors and the interaction between opposing advocacy coalitions. Furthermore, the framework includes factors ignored in earlier approaches to studying policy, including the consideration of external factors such as economic conditions and the role of beliefs or the limitations imposed by stable parameters such as a constitution.

A study using the ACF may apply the ACF to organize and understand a higher education policy arena’s history, context, and institutional constraints, while analyzing the use of

information within the higher education policy arena as actors for coalitions and strive to change the beliefs of opposing coalitions. One study applied the ACF to New York State and analyzed the coalitions' use of information during the budgetary process for higher education (Shakespeare, 2005). The ACF's strength was its ability to focus analytical attention to the limited policy change opportunities in the state because of a contextual item which the ACF highlights: the state's constitution.

### *Limitations*

There are a few aspects of the framework that limit its usefulness for some policy studies. One limitation of the framework is that in order to study the complex mix of actors, coalitions, their belief systems, and changing external events, a timeframe of at least ten years is necessary, in order to assess, for instance, the stability and influence of coalitions over time. Furthermore, the framework involves the assessment of core values and their influence on policy change and decisions. Therefore, the assessment of core values is more prominent than the policy processes that determine when policy changes will actually take place. In addition, changes to the core values underlying formal policies are relatively rare, so change appears negligible over time (Heck, 2004). Lastly, the framework is large and unwieldy, making identification of a unit of analysis difficult (Schlager, 1999).

### Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) Framework

The Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework is concerned with studying the effects of institutional arrangements on patterns of human behavior and the resulting patterns of policies. Combining a wide range of disciplines, the IAD framework examines the rules used by individuals for determining "who and what are included in decision situations, how information is structured, what actions can be taken and in what sequence, and how individual

actions will be aggregated into collective decisions” (Kiser & Ostrom, 1982, p. 179).

Institutional arrangements are a complex set of rules, “all of which exist in a language shared by some community of individuals rather than as the physical parts of some external government” (Kiser & Ostrom, 1982, p. 179).

An institutional rational choice approach to policy analysis, the IAD framework was developed in 1982 and has since been applied to a variety of empirical settings. Based on the earlier research of Douglass C. North and related writers in the new institutional economics tradition, the IAD framework subscribes to the notion of bounded rationality as the most appropriate way of conceptualizing the behaviors of policy actors (Clark, 1998; North, 1990). “For policymakers and scholars interested in issues related to how different governance systems enable individuals to solve problems democratically, the IAD framework helps to organize diagnostic, analytical, and prescriptive capabilities” (Ostrom, 1999).

The goal of the IAD is to provide a common framework and a group of theories to understand policy reforms and transitions. The IAD is an attempt to conduct institutional assessments of performance in a systematic way while avoiding assessments of what constitutes a “good” or “bad” institution (Ostrom, 1999). The IAD helps the policy analyst propose likely policy outcomes by identifying the major types of structural variables that are present to some extent in all institutional arrangements, while also recognizing that underlying values differ from one type of institutional arrangement to another. The framework helps to develop a common language to analyze a wide range of policy issues, since the study of policy often combines several disciplines.

*Definition of Institutions*

The IAD framework refers to institutions as the shared concepts used by humans in repetitive situations organized by rules, norms, and strategies (Crawford & Ostrom, 1995). North (1990) describes institutions as “the rules of the game in a society or, more formally...the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (p. 3). Institutions guide human interaction and reduce uncertainty by providing a structure to everyday life and include any form of constraint that human beings devise to shape human interaction. Formal or informal, constraints, can be written or unwritten, and can evolve over time (North, 1990).

By rules, Ostrom (1999) refers to the shared prescriptions “that are mutually understood and predictably enforced in particular situations by agents responsible for monitoring conduct and for imposing sanctions” (p. 123). Rules may be nested in other sets of rules that define how the first set of rules may be changed. By norms, Ostrom (1999) refers to the shared prescriptions that tend to be enforced by the participants themselves through externally and internally imposed costs and inducements. By strategies, Ostrom (1999) refers to the “regularized plans that individuals make within the structure of incentives produced by rules, norms, and expectations of the likely behavior of others in a situation affected by relevant physical and material conditions” (p. 37).

*Identifying Rules-in-Use*

Because institutions are shared concepts and in many ways invisible—neither explicit nor written—one of the difficulties with the IAD framework is identification and measurement of institutions. Examining the “Rules in use” is the method for identifying and measuring institutions. Rules in use are the “dos and don’ts that one learns on the ground that may not exist in any written document” (Ostrom, 1999, p. 38).

The IAD suggests at least three levels of decision-making: constitutional, collective choice, and operational (Ostrom, 1999). At each of these levels, a nested structure of rules within rules guides the interactions and decisions of actors through the incentives and constraints established by rules in use at higher levels.

For this reason, the IAD framework encompasses the multiple levels of institutional arrangements. Ostrom, Gardner, and Walker (1994) present a framework for institutional analysis that identifies an action arena, the resulting patterns of interactions and outcomes, and the evaluative criteria for assessing the outcomes. An action situation is characterized by a cluster of seven variables 1) participants; 2) positions; 3) outcomes; 4) action-outcome linkages; 5) the control that participants exercise; 6) information; and 7) the costs and benefits assigned to outcomes. An actor holds assumptions about four clusters of variables: 1) the resources that an actor brings to a situation; 2) the valuation actors assign to states of the world and to actions; 3) the way actors acquire, process, retain, and use knowledge contingencies and information; and 4) the processes actors use for the selection of particular courses of action (Ostrom, 1999, p. 42).

The actor can be thought of as a single individual or as a group functioning as a corporate actor. With the IAD, “the analyst makes assumptions about how and what participants value; what resources, information, and beliefs they have; what their information-processing capabilities are; and what internal mechanisms they use to decide upon strategies” (Ostrom, 1999, p. 44). In most policy situations, the conditions are uncertain and complex and actors are limited in their ability to make rational decisions; therefore, bounded rationality can be assumed (Ostrom, Gardner, & Walker, 1994).

Furthermore, the IAD is based on the foundation of actor choices. As North (1990) explains, “the choice theoretic approach is essential because a logically consistent, potentially

testable set of hypotheses must be built on a theory of human behavior....Institutions are a creation of human beings. They evolve and are altered by human beings; hence our theory must begin with the individual” (p. 5).

The IAD framework is useful for connecting human behavior to outcomes. Within an action arena, policy outcomes can be anticipated. Rather than the behavior and decision making of individuals being completely independent or autonomous, individuals may be embedded in communities, where norms guide behavior. Participants may adopt a broader range of strategies and they may change their strategies over time as they learn about the results of past actions (Ostrom, 1999). Therefore, it is possible to connect past actions with certain outcomes.

Along with expecting certain outcomes, the framework can be used to evaluate alternative institutional arrangements (Ostrom, 1999). In institutional analysis, the action arenas are viewed as dependent variables while the rules-in-use are the most important independent variables, because the rules determine the behaviors of actors. Using the IAD framework, the goal of the analyst is to understand how the “rules, states of the world, and the nature of the community all jointly affect the types of actions that individuals can take, the benefits and costs of these actions and resulting outcomes, and the likely outcomes achieved” (p. 50).

### *Limitations*

With its emphasis on the role of the actors, the main limitations of the IAD framework is its assumptions about actors. The IAD assumes that individuals are self-serving and goal oriented in all situations (Schlager, 1995). It assumes that actors make commitments based on incentives and sanctions.

### Summary

In this paper, six prominent frameworks used in policy studies were examined. Each framework possesses both strengths and weaknesses for application to policy research. A framework can bring particular aspects of a policy issue to light, while also obscuring or distorting the policy issue at hand due to the conceptual underpinnings of the framework. For this reason, it is important to keep in mind the aims of the research study and to consider the contextual elements surrounding the research question, such as the actors involved or the policy environment.

There were a number of other frameworks that were not examined in this paper and future literature reviews could focus on the emerging frameworks and methodological approaches used in policy studies. Some of these alternative approaches utilize for example critical, postmodern, or feminist lenses, viewing policymaking as a socially constructed activity. It may be useful to consider how these emerging frameworks can be used with the “traditional” or dominant frameworks. Together they may help to better illuminate relationships among power, culture, and language that underlie policies.

This review was intended to help advance policy studies in higher education research. By utilizing these and other policy theory frameworks, policy research in higher education can be further developed and strengthened.

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