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Where Has Maine Been? Where is Maine Going? Taking the Long View of Maine's Policy Context

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Where Has Maine Been? Where is Maine Going? Taking the Long View of Maine's Policy Context

by Linda Silka

In this issue, we initiate what we hope will become a regular *MPR* column, which will look forward and look back at policy issues in Maine. The mission of *MPR* has always been to bring research to bear on emerging policy challenges. But it is possible to become myopic when the focus is too much on the present, too much about what is currently most pressing, with no regard for what has been tried in the past. Looking across long periods can be an important way to see what we have gained or lost in past policy efforts.

A dynamic way to start a conversation about past policy is to seek out leaders who have participated in policy work in Maine for extended periods and across different contexts, who have contributed through different roles, and who have made an impact. This inaugural column draws on interviews with four such leaders: Aram Calhoun, Andy Coburn, Carla Dickstein, and Evan Richert. Their work covers a range of topics on which they have had significant impacts. All have made important contributions in the face of difficult

challenges. As we shall see, central to their work has been an increasing understanding of the complex dynamics by which research affects policy and the complicated means by which policy is enacted so that it can make a difference to the lives of Mainers.

DISCUSSION FORMAT

I interviewed the leaders individually and asked them to reflect on their experiences with the ebbs and flows of Maine's policy context. I asked

THE POLICY LEADERS

Aram Calhoun is professor of wetland ecology in the Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Conservation Biology at the University of Maine, with research interests in vernal pool ecology and conservation and wetland ecology. She teaches courses in wetland mapping and delineation, wetland ecology and conservation, field studies in ecology, and environmental solutions. Calhoun received a bachelor's degree from Brown University; a master's in education from Rhode Island College, a master's in natural resources science from University of Rhode Island; and a Ph.D. from the University of Maine.

Andrew Coburn is a research professor in public health at University of Southern Maine. He has a long-standing commitment to the application of health services research in policy making. His areas of expertise include health insurance, rural health, patient safety and quality, and Medicaid policy. Coburn is the founding director of the Maine Rural Health Research Center, one of seven national centers funded by the federal Office of Rural Health Policy. He holds a bachelor's from Brown University; a master's of education from Harvard University; and a Ph.D. from Brandeis University.

Carla Dickstein is senior vice president for research and policy development at Coastal Enterprises Inc., where she oversees CEI's state policy work and develops new initiatives. She currently focuses on the health care sector, challenges and opportunities for Maine's older adults, and improving opportunities for young adults and new Americans. Previously, she was on the faculty of West Virginia University's Regional Research Institute and WVU Extension Service. She holds a bachelor's degree from Smith College; a master's degree from the University of Minnesota; and a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania.

Evan Richert has filled many policy leadership roles in Maine. He served as director of the Maine State Planning Office under Governor Angus King Jr. Richert has also served as associate research professor in the Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine. He was lead principal investigator for Gulf of Maine Census in the global Census of Marine Life Project and lead principal investigator for forming the Northeast Association of Coastal Ocean Observing Systems. He now has his own planning consulting practice. Richert holds a master's of regional planning from Syracuse University.

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questions about how they got started in policy work and how their policy work changed over time. I also asked them to reflect on the challenges they encountered and how they achieved their successes. We focused on policy topics that were important at particular times, but also discussed the processes by which new policies are enacted in Maine. They reflected on lessons they learned and what these lessons suggest about preparing students for a future in policy making and policy research.

The depth of knowledge of these four leaders is impressive, and their reflections are reminders of the importance of retaining the knowledge accrued by such leaders.

MAKING SLOW PROGRESS IN THE FACE OF INSTABILITY

We might assume that these policy leaders, who have worked for decades in their respective fields, had settled into a stable and predictable policy landscape and were making regular, if incremental, progress. Indeed, people new to a policy arena often begin with the assumption that all of the elements—the players, topics, and the approaches—will be predictable once familiarity has been achieved. But these experienced leaders offered many examples of how they found stability to be elusive. Those who hold elected policy positions might not be there after the next election or the most urgent policy problem may change rapidly, which can make it hard to achieve progress. Yet these leaders also saw that the shifting array of players could represent opportunities. While there can be a loss of knowledge about what was previously attempted, new people can bring an infusion of fresh ideas. The challenge is how to maintain knowledge of past

policy attempts while staying open to rapid shifts and attendant opportunities.

Andy Coburn talked about what he has learned from working in rural health policy for over 25 years. Although we might expect that the challenges of rural healthcare delivery and costs of care would be fully addressed by now, given the significant policy effort expended on these problems, old problems, such as health workforce, remain and new ones, such as rural hospital closures, have emerged. As part of the Maine Health Access Foundation's efforts to support rural communities as they envision the future of their rural health systems, Andy and his colleagues have recently used their historical knowledge of Maine health policy to develop analyses and reports on rural health in Maine.

BRINGING DISCORDANT VOICES TOGETHER

The need to bring together different perspectives was a recurring theme throughout the conversations. Regardless of the topic, there are generally divergent points of view. Success in the policy field depends on developing adroit ways to help people with differing views find common ground. Aram Calhoun offered examples of taking the long view (decades long) in her collaborative work on vernal pools. As a conservation biologist, she has worked for decades on how to preserve the temporary pools on private lands that are crucial for amphibians. There was the need to bring together private landowners, developers, municipal officials, scientists, and conservationists to develop an effective, fair, and implementable policy. Aram pointed to the decades of efforts that were needed to develop the policies. It took time for all participants to begin to trust each other enough to enable

them to be completely open with each other. She also talked about how all the participants were changed through the process. One developer teased Aram that he “hated” her because he had come to care about vernal pools.

ORGANIZATIONS THAT SERVE AS INTERMEDIARIES

The interviewees all pointed to the unexpected importance that intermediary organizations—called *boundary* organizations—play in Maine's success in policy making. These organizations bring together policymakers and researchers who might not otherwise find each other. They help create conditions for finding common ground. Such organizations are themselves highly varied and include, for example, the Maine Health Access Foundation, Maine Rural Health Research Center, and Maine Lakes Environmental Association. Some of the interviewees currently work in intermediary organizations; some have in the past. Frequently, boundary organizations act as the memory keepers. When politicians change, there are still boundary organizations. Maine, as recent studies suggest, may be especially replete with effective boundary organizations.

MAINE'S ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

In reflecting on what they have observed over time, all the leaders pondered the question of why many of Maine's indicators (e.g., median income, graduation rates, health status) continue to show limited improvement. Maine continues to underachieve relative to other New England states despite various policy interventions. Programs have been developed, for example, aimed at

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increasing the college graduation rate and increasing resources available for those pursuing new business opportunities. The leaders noted that much of what has been enacted in Maine has been based on the best available research for policies that have long-term economic impacts. Yet large-scale improvement has continued to elude us. The question is, are we doing too little to have the needed impact? Or perhaps, are we not doing as much as other similar states are doing?

The leaders also reflected on Maine's competitive advantages and how policy efforts might be directed at strengthening those areas where we could be most competitive. If Maine cannot do everything, perhaps as policymakers and citizens, we need to make choices about what we should do. Carla Dickstein pointed to work indicating that the Gulf of Maine is one of Maine's competitive advantages. The question then becomes, how can we build around the state's competitive advantages such as the Gulf of Maine? Can limited funds be used in ways most likely to make a policy difference?

Some of the leaders also pointed out that capitalizing on competitive advantages becomes even more challenging when dramatic and unexpected changes occur such as the loss of Maine's legacy manufacturing industries resulting from the rapid closure of many mills. The loss is huge; it has ripple effects. One policy avenue is to look at whether we could have done a better job predicting these closures and thus have prepared better. It is also becoming clearer, they noted, that people from different policy arenas need to come together in these situations. For example, people studying legacy industries need to be in contact with those who are experimenting with new industries.

The leaders also discussed the importance of innovation. It may be important to innovate out of the troubles of Maine's rural economy, for example. Yet the literature indicates that rural areas are at a disadvantage when it comes to innovation. Innovation is associated with urban areas rather than rural areas. The leaders pointed to ways that Maine might use rural advantages (the heightened opportunities to communicate) while trying to erase disadvantages (innovation is often stymied if groups that take different approaches to the same problem are not brought together because this union stimulates innovation).

FOCUSING ON INFRASTRUCTURE

According to these policy leaders, Maine's infrastructure is an important overarching future focus for policy. They discussed the challenges of the infrastructure Maine does not have enough of—universally available high-speed broadband, for example. But they also noted the challenges of what we have too much of—too many maintained roads given the decline in our rural population. And they pointed out that the need for infrastructure can take many forms. Higher education facilities such as research labs can be important infrastructure as universities strengthen their capacity to serve as anchor institutions.

The need to update and strengthen infrastructure—and have policies in place that can contribute to doing so—can also take many forms in a marine state like Maine. Evan Richert pointed out that as the Gulf of Maine is increasingly recognized as a key part of the state's economy, it is increasingly important to have infrastructure that provides immediate information about ocean conditions. This infrastructure did not exist. Evan coordinated work

with multiple groups to install state-of-the-art data-collection buoys. This project provides the information needed to advance work in the Gulf of Maine and thereby contributes to Maine's economy in an area where the state may have a competitive advantage. The project serves as a model for other New England states.

INTERLINKED PROBLEMS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKING

All the leaders were concerned about how the challenges are often intertwined. The interviewees frequently made this point by discussing the interlinked challenges that Maine's rural counties now face: outmigration of young people, disappearance of traditional industries, and attracting new jobs to rural areas that often lack high-speed internet access. Small rural towns face the challenges of maintaining schools, health care, and infrastructure designed for much larger populations. The leaders repeatedly commented on how interlinked these problems are: jobs, education, health care, economic development, land use planning, and regulation. When we develop policies, we must take into account all of the interlinkages, for example, considering policies on education and jobs together.

Evan Richert noted that much attention in earlier decades focused on the interlinked problems associated with suburbanization: sprawl, loss of virgin land to development, congestion, and mismatches between where services are located and where they are needed. These continue to be problems, but, in parts of the state, their relative importance has declined in the face of the tsunami of loss taking place in Maine's rural communities. What is challenging,

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Evan noted, is how a state prepares for problems that it cannot fully anticipate: the loss of industries, for example, when Maine is buffeted by shifts in international economy outside of its control. Being prepared for the unknown requires an ongoing commitment to innovation, using research and development as both a means of discovery and a driver of economic growth.

SCALE AND ITS IMPORTANCE

These leaders reflected on the challenges of policy work at different scales, such as community, watershed, and state scales. Through their diverse experiences, they have become repositories of knowledge about working at different scales. For example, Evan Richert served as state planning office director, but also as town planner in communities in southern and central Maine. Aram Calhoun has collaborated with the state legislature, but has also brought her research knowledge to collaborations at the town level. These leaders reflected on the pros and cons of pursuing policy impacts at each scale. At the local level, policymakers and those affected by the policy can get to know each other, deliberate together, potentially work out their differences, and customize the policy. The levers for change, however, may be outside that local level. Policies enacted by one community may have little impact on the regional economy or overall health of a watershed. At the state level, the reach is broader and the impact potentially greater, but it may be harder to achieve the changes, and the unintended consequences may also be greater. Enacting a one-size-fits-all policy on school reform may work for densely populated parts of Maine, but have unexpected consequences for areas of

declining enrollment where the student population is dispersed. In the health arena, according to Andy Coburn, scale is also an ongoing policy issue. Past policies encouraged the development of rural hospitals, which makes health care more accessible in rural areas, but health-care infrastructure can be increasingly expensive to maintain when populations decline. Policymakers and researchers are currently wrestling with the question of how to decide the optimal scale for various health services and what policies would help this happen.

STUDENTS AS FUTURE CONTRIBUTORS TO MAINE'S POLICY ENVIRONMENT

An important theme we kept returning to was how best to prepare students to contribute to policy as future leaders. The interviewees pointed to many challenges previously discussed: the length of time to enact policy, the differing perspectives needed to produce effective policy, the instability of the policy environment, and the rapid shifts that can occur in what most urgently requires attention. Policy leaders need a variety of soft skills for working in conflict-ridden situations and with people with different perspectives. They also often need broad interdisciplinary knowledge. The question is, how can we teach these soft skills in addition to the technical and research skills that are so crucial?

Aram Calhoun described the ways she involves her students in experiences beyond the classroom. The students receive rigorous research in a context that allows them to understand the difficult challenges and develop a

capacity to work with them. She helps her students see how the research rarely speaks for itself, but must be communicated in ways that work for diverse groups engaged in policy development. She familiarizes students with concepts such as coupled natural-human systems that demonstrate the interlinked nature of the problems and policy challenges. Andy Coburn talked about how we need to move beyond teaching students that the only focus for research should be publication. We must encourage students to look at the problems in the contexts in which they occur and consider what research is needed to inform policy decisions. Evan Richert pointed to how esoteric training of students can become, especially when we judge student success largely in terms of mastery of the details of theory within their discipline. He suggested using Pasteur's Quadrant (Figure 1), an analysis that highlights the value of research that has application potential in a policy domain, as one way to move beyond this narrow focus in our training of students.

The world current students will face is likely to differ markedly from the past. As legacy industries disappear, there may be a premium on innovation and flexibility, and students who have been trained to work in this complex environment may have better chances of thriving.

FIGURE 1: Pasteur's Quadrant

		Considerations of use	
		No	Yes
Quest for fundamental understanding?	Yes	Pure basic research	Use-inspired basic research
	No	—	Pure applied research

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CONCLUSION

What have we learned? As noted at the outset, people often express frustration that we are making insufficient progress in policy areas. We enact a new policy. It does not work the way we thought it would, so we try something else. It can seem that we are going around in circles, trying one thing and then another, or even the same things repeatedly without much knowledge of what worked or didn't work in the past. Additionally, the available policy tools may seem paltry in the face of the magnitude of the problems. New problems keep emerging. The problems seemingly keep multiplying.

But is all of this the case? Should we, in effect, throw up our hands? These interviewed leaders would seem to suggest otherwise. They offered many examples of how we are getting better at policy and how better-constructed policies are making a difference. But their insights also suggest that we need to think about what we are learning and how we can continue to improve. We need to think about how we convey this knowledge to each other and ensure that we transmit this knowledge to new leaders and new generations. In sum, we need to keep in mind the overarching insights these leaders offered:

- Progress can be made, but it will depend on flexibility. It is important to remember lessons from the past, but it is equally important to be astute about applying lessons from different times and different contexts. The leaders continually returned to this theme of arriving at appropriate levels of flexibility. Policy making might seem like it is about rightness, about the correct generalizable solution

based on lessons of the past. On the contrary, the leaders stressed the importance of adaptability, the merit of not insisting on doing the exact same thing each time. They talked about learning to be flexible in approaching how to solve the problem and at what scale to work. With this flexibility, they argued, it becomes possible to make progress in the face of changing conditions and problems.

- We need to do a better job of aligning and incorporating research and evaluation. We must be look for new ways to use emerging research to craft effective policies and allow sufficient time for the policies to achieve their impact. Furthermore, if we develop new polices based on research, the available research must become better aligned with policy needs. We also need research to track the impacts of policies. After a policy has been enacted, we should conduct evaluations to assess whether the policy had the intended effects or had unintended consequences.
- New problems will emerge that will call for policy innovations. All the leaders emphasized that it is hard to know what new problems or opportunities might be on the horizon. Aquaculture is an opportunity not fully expected. The opioid crisis is a problem whose full-blown nature was unanticipated. How do we prepare for the unexpected? Part of the goal should be finding the overarching lessons that transcend particular problems or specific contexts.

The leaders stress that we need to learn from the past, but not overlearn, and we need to figure out how face the future in innovative ways. The experiences and recommendations from these policy leaders offer lots of food for thought. 🐟



Linda Silka is the executive editor of the *Maine Policy Review*. A social and community psychologist by training, Silka was formerly director of the University of Maine's Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center. In addition to her role with the *MPR*, she is a senior fellow at UMaine's Senator George J. Mitchell Center for Sustainability Solutions.