

Appendix 1. The Enablers¹

"You are not only responsible for what you say, but also for what you do not say." —Martin Luther

"People who want to remain silent or to go along with any sort of craziness often tell themselves that they need to stay in the room so they can sound the alarm, but they refuse to sound the alarm so they can stay in the room."
—Charley Sykes

I once interviewed for a position with a large D.C.-area firm that specialized in industrial-organizational (I/O) testing (i.e., personnel, or employment, testing). The series of meetings with potential workmates lasted most of the day. I also delivered a well-received auditorium presentation to most of the staff. The several individual and small-group interviews throughout the day went well. I enjoyed lunch with several employees. All conversations proceeded splendidly.

The firm had just won a large contract and was hiring several new staff. I judged the odds of a job offer to be very high. As friendly as could be, the president of the firm interviewed me early in the day and introduced my presentation.

Then, later in the afternoon, in between the second-to-last and last interviews of the day, the president approached me, copy of a journal in hand. He had noticed from my CV that I had published an article in an industry journal, *The Industrial-Organizational Psychologist* (TIP) (Phelps, 1999). The article critiqued a particular National Research Council (NRC) report, highly unpopular among I/O psychologists (Hartigan & Wigdor, 1989). That report had unfairly derided some of the most important and respected research in his field (e.g., Hunter & Hunter, 1984; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), which I defended.¹

The president was visibly angry, pressing his finger on the list of committee members in the NRC report. I had claimed in my article that no academic experts in I/O psychology were included among the report's committee members. The president was pointing to one name in the list—that of the one I/O psychologist on the committee, who was working in industry at the time. He thought I was unacceptably wrong. He had a point.

But whether one counted I/O Psychologist Paul Sackett as one or zero, the committee included few topical experts, and oddly large numbers of the clearly inexperienced and education

¹ Appendix 1 of the book, *The Malfunction of US Education Policy: Elite Misinformation, Disinformation, and Selfishness*, by Richard P. Phelps

professors (six out of fourteen). In the article, I also described some of the latter group's research to illustrate their predisposition against high-stakes testing.

To my surprise, the I/O firm president defended the NRC report and seemed to have had a part in its gestation himself. Turns out, though himself an I/O psychologist who managed a consulting firm that specialized I/O testing, also on occasion bid on educational testing contracts, and sometimes served on committees with the educational testing scholars of the NRC committee. I had had the temerity to challenge one of the most transparently biased works in testing and measurement research, written by his allies, and that upset him.²

One might argue that he betrayed his primary profession for the sake of friendships or greater access to remunerative contracts. Indeed, some years later he was elected president of the primary organization of *educational* testing professionals.

The president was implying that the single I/O testing expert on the committee, Paul Sackett, whose name lay at the end of his finger, supported the conclusions of the report. A mutual friend, the late Frank Schmidt, had told me that he most emphatically did not. But, whatever the veracity of Schmidt's contention, Sackett apparently never revealed his feelings publicly. I've looked online and haven't found any. I inquired by email and received no response from him.

Sackett's public silence about the NRC travesty effected at least four outcomes:

1. He remained in good standing with the committee and was invited back to participate in the production of several more (also very slanted) reports on testing.
2. To all appearances, outside a small circle of trusted colleagues, he appears to have fully supported that and the other NRC reports, their execution, and their skewed conclusions. After all, his name is there on the list of committee members, *cum* authors.
3. He was later appointed to the board of directors of the I/O testing firm.
4. The few outside the NRC tent who protested the committee's bias and the NRC's corruption were left that much more isolated, exposed, and vulnerable to retaliation and professional abuse in his absence (*Psychology Today* 2022; Sanderson 2020; Tait 2020).

By all appearances, Paul Sackett has enjoyed a long career of great accomplishment and success, even winning prestigious awards. In the interest of truth-seeking, and for the benefit of society's understanding and a more accurate and useful research literature, however, he could have exposed the NRC Committee's malpractice. Had he done so—had he “blown the whistle”—it is less likely that he would have been invited back to participate in other NRC panels or appointed to the board of directors of the I/O testing firm.

His silence may have facilitated his professional standing, but one wonders how much. Does having an 82-page long curriculum vita rather than, say, a 78-page long curriculum vita justify aiding a cover up and a corrupt use of public funds?

A comment made by the I/O testing company president while scolding me has remained with me over the years. He claimed that the NRC director at the time, Alexandra K. Wigdor, had known very little about standardized testing when he and his colleagues first met her. But, he claimed, they spent a great deal of time with her to educate her on the topic. Educate her to their point of view, apparently. In other words, she was "groomed" to view testing and measurement the right way, their way, just as so many other information gatekeepers have been.

I telephoned Wigdor to inquire about the lopsided configuration of the report committee. She replied that it would have been inappropriate to recruit a majority I/O psychologist committee because they might have been biased in favor of I/O research. Over the next several years, I watched to see if subsequent NRC *educational* testing reports included a plurality of I/O psychologists and eschewed educational testing experts, under the same appropriateness principle. No. Subsequent reports on educational testing included similar pluralities of anti-testing education professors, plus Paul Sackett.

Grooming Journalists and Policymakers, Co-opting Scholars

Grooming information gatekeepers, be they government agency directors or journalists, is most successful when they turn completely, becoming true believers in one faction's point of view, uninterested in considering other perspectives (Hoffer, 1951). They may even adopt one faction's negative characterizations of others and hold those other factions in contempt (Bai, Fiske, & Griffith, 2022).

How is such grooming and turning accomplished? Recalling psychologists' studies of the mechanisms and power of gossip, gossip works because people want to belong; they want to feel that they are a valued member of a group they respect. When the group confides one of their naughty and clandestine activities, such as ostracizing an "other," it reassures the information gatekeeper that they are trusted as a group member. They are a valued part of a selective elite (Bechtoldt, Beersma, & Dijkstra, 2020; Schafer, 2021).

Journalists Lynn Olson and Robert Rothman did not just report on the work of the federally funded Center for Research on Educational Standards and Student Testing (CRESST) from the 1980s into the 2000s, they were colleagues, equal partners with what they considered to be the top scholarly elite of the era. So, too, apparently, are journalists Matt Barnum and Jill Barshay today, only now with a newer self-proclaimed top scholarly elite, the Education Reform Citation Cartel.

Michael Feuer would succeed Alexandra Wigdor at the NRC's Board on Testing and Assessment in the 1990s and faithfully maintain allegiance to the CRESST family and friends, producing reliably one-sided reports loaded with their preferred evidence, and dismissal or disdain for the mountains of evidence they disliked (Hauser, 1999; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Phelps, 2008/2009, 2012; Hout & Elliot, 2011). The "world's schoolmaster," Andreas Schleicher is German and works at the Paris-headquartered OECD,³ but he has clearly adopted the Cartel Alliance as a go-to group for contract research and taken their side on US and some other education policy issues (Phelps, 2014). For example, he affirmed the US Common Core Standards when other international committee invitees balked at its ludicrous claim to be "internationally competitive" (*Nonpartisan Education Review*, 2013).⁴

Each of these information brokers has been responsible either for hundreds of widely distributed publications or publications with gold-plated reputations for quality. Any one of them taking sides and suppressing information relevant to policy debates would be cause for concern, yet all of them have done so.

Like so many other taxpayer or foundation funded "blue ribbon" commissions, panels, task forces, or boards, the "findings" of National Research Council reports on education issues are foreordained. NRC education-related board directors assure beforehand that their people comprise a majority or decisive plurality.

Then, they invite other celebrity researchers who know little of the relevant research literature or scholarly disputes, and are not really qualified to serve, but accept anyway because the appointment adds a prestigious credential to their CVs. Not only do they know little of relevance, they are too busy to devote an adequate amount of time to educate themselves. They mostly keep quiet and otherwise go with the flow. In any committee vote, they are more likely to side with the nice people who invited them than with any disruptive dissenter (van den Besselaar, 2012).

Credential hoarding motivates both parties in this bargain. The unqualified celebrity scholar adds the committee's credentials to their CV; the committee adds the scholar's credentials to their report. Most outside observers will not know that the scholar was unqualified to serve; they will notice only the general status level of the credentials.

Such bargains are made by strategic scholars. An organization run by sincere scholars would not invite unqualified scholars to serve on a committee simply to milk their credentials. Likewise, a sincere scholar would decline an invitation to serve on a committee for which they were unqualified.

Where were the psychologists?

One might have reasonably assumed given the thrust of U.S. education policy in the early 2000s that the century-old research literature on educational testing's effects would have been

exposed, made widely familiar, and meticulously analyzed. But just the opposite happened—the bulk of an available research literature that could have helped guide the implementation of federal education policy, as represented by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the Common Core standards, was declared nonexistent.

Moreover, both “sides” in education policy debates concurred: education professors and associations who had long held the view and Republican Party policy advisors—most of them economists—whom one would have expected to be more supportive of the research. After seconding testing opponents’ claim that little to no research existed on the effects of standardized testing, some of the Republican think tankers declared themselves to be pioneers in conducting such research.

There existed over 1,500 studies on testing effects dating back to the early 1900’s, most of them conducted by research psychologists and program evaluators. Moreover, as some prominent psychologists have argued, standardized testing may be psychology’s most useful single contribution to society.

Yet, when U.S. education policy needed psychologists’ expertise the most, the only voices heard in the testing policy debate were those of education professors and groups, with a self-interest in the issue, and economists, who lobbied for, and have received, public resources to build a research literature from scratch. Where were psychologists?

The journalist John Higgins once expressed to me his surprise at the small number of psychologists in education research news stories. He had scanned a list of the 100 “most influential” (i.e., most often mentioned in public venues) scholars in US education policy and found many education and economics professors but just one psychologist. I guessed, “Dan Willingham?” He affirmed.

University of Virginia professor Dan Willingham sports a very public figure.⁵ He writes books for a popular readership and has authored a column called “Ask the Cognitive Psychologist,” in the popular American Federation of Teachers magazine, *American Educator*. But, for years, he stood as the lone psychologist in the celebrity class of US education researchers.

One might counter that arguably the most important information gatekeeper in the 2000s, the US Education Department’s Grover “Russ” Whitehurst, was a psychologist, an expert in early childhood development. The George W. Bush White House knew him because he had worked on a charity’s infant development project for the president’s spouse, Barbara Bush.

Therein, apparently, lay the problem. Whitehurst would be called upon to make many consequential decisions regarding research and policy on educational testing and measurement and, later, curriculum and instruction. He knew little about either. Even worse, he was unfamiliar with the US testing and measurement community and culture. In his naïveté, he relied, as most of us often do, on credentials as a proxy for expertise and character.

Arguably, CRESST represented the most credentialed group of testing and measurement scholars in the country when Whitehurst ran the Institute of Education Sciences. That much of their work was dishonest—full of selective references and dismissive reviews—and some of it fraudulent (e.g., Koretz's "experiment" on test score inflation), lay beyond Whitehurst's field of perception.

Whitehurst also accepted at face value what he read in CRESST-dominated National Research Council reports, including their false claims of research voids

Otherwise, Whitehurst went along with the established GOP retainer of economics and political science policy advisors, seldomly consulting psychologists, program evaluators, or practitioners.

As for the three long-serving US Secretaries of Education over the millennium's first two decades, perhaps it goes without saying that all three were too naive to critically evaluate the education research and citation cartels they faced. They, too, would view credentials as proxies for expertise, and just go along.

The Politically Careful US Testing Industry

The “big bang” among US educational testing firms occurred around the turn of the millennium. What had been a staid industry in which every firm stayed in its place overnight became hyper-competitive, customer-pleasing, and, I would argue, less concerned with the quality of tests and the integrity of their administration. The psychometricians who had long managed test development were replaced by business professionals with little relevant training or experience.

Many of the customers to be pleased, of course, worked inside education, as faculty in education schools and as administrators in state and local education departments. Many of them disliked standardized tests, particularly those externally administered with some consequences, and over which they had little control. Some of them hated standardized tests.

Customer-friendly testing firms would adapt to honor their customers’ beliefs and preferences.

Ultimately, the inundation of money promoting the Common Core Initiative corrupted even the profession of psychometrics. Some of the country’s most influential psychometricians violated their own “bible” of good practice, the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, by working for and promoting the not-yet-validated Common Core tests.

Promoting Viewpoint Diversity?

The organization ResearchED assumes an admirable purpose. It endeavors to minimize the distance between applicable education research and teachers. Have teachers read the research directly they advocate; they are smart people; they can understand it. Have teachers themselves be the experimenters implementing research hypotheses in the classroom to verify them, or not. Make the dialectic interaction between theory and application quicker. Find out what works, now.⁶

It just so happens that much of the research useful to instruction is found in the psychology literature. Perhaps it is also true in the United Kingdom, where ResearchED was started, but it is certainly true in the United States that the formation of graduate schools of education started a process that, within a few decades time, divorced much educationists' research from its origins in psychology. By the turn of the millennium most education school professors would recognize no need to follow education-applicable developments in psychology research.

ResearchED sought to change that, by bringing the useful psychology research into the classroom via teachers willing to study and apply it. The concept worked in the UK, as I witnessed myself at a UK ResearchED annual conference. Session after session was led by schoolteachers who had taken it upon themselves to read primary research in psychology journals and apply it in their classrooms.

Meanwhile, the US branch of the organization was run by the energetic Eric Kalenze with all the good intentions of the organization's principles.⁷ In 2017, Kalenze arranged a panel discussion on media coverage of education research. The panel consisted of me, an outspoken critic of US education journalism, and two journalists: the head of the Education Writers Association and a specialist who reported on education research.

The panel moderator headed the Deans for Impact organization, one of many organizations of education professionals largely beholden to familiar Reform Cartel funders (e.g., Gates, Chan Zuckerberg, Schusterman, Dell, and Bezos Foundations).⁸

The moderator posed one question uniquely to me. He said that he had talked to some of the scholars I had accused of information suppression and asked them why they wrote dismissive reviews. They told him that they saw no need to read previous education research because it was "all (expletive)." I countered that much of their research was "(expletive)," too. But I could have added a few more pertinent points:

1. Citation Cartel researchers I have criticized for selective referencing and dismissive reviewing read very little past research. Generally, they read that done by others in their mutual admiration group and little from outside their group (typically that which rises above the celebrity threshold—that which is so well-known that it cannot be ignored). Moreover, they read little research conducted prior to the mid-1990s when the World Wide Web was introduced.

2. Most of the researchers I criticize dismiss any research using qualitative methods (except on those occasions when they themselves employ such methods), such as: surveys, interviews, case studies, observations, and ethnographies. Those methods are not “rigorous,” they claim. By this logic, researchers using “not rigorous” methods include Charles Darwin, Jane Goodall, Albert Einstein, Dian Fossey, Franz Boas, Alexander von Humboldt, Edward Jenner, and Thomas Kuhn (and most other historians).
3. Those I most criticize ignore almost completely a century’s worth of research conducted by psychologists and program evaluators, in favor of that published in economics, political science, and education. To say that all the research they ignore is “(expletive)” is to identify a hundred years of psychology and evaluation research as (expletive).

The hearty thanks I received from several separate, individual audience members afterwards suggested to me that I was not alone in feeling that press coverage of education research is rigged in favor of those with money and power.

In contrast to the UK ResearchED meeting, teachers appeared to constitute only a small proportion of the US meeting attendees. Meanwhile, the US meeting was overrun with well subsidized Reform Cartel members, there presumably to gain exposure for their group's research while ignoring or dismissing the rest.

Citation cartels mis- and dis-inform. At best, they replace research conducted by the less influential with research conducted by the more influential. At worst, they reduce the amount of useful information available to the public, policymakers, and other scholars, and skew public policies to their advantage. Such behavior is clearly unethical, perhaps cowardly (if deliberately trying to avoid debate and the Popperian dialectic), and all too common.

Like ResearchED, Heterodox Academy exists to facilitate awareness and dissemination of divergent evidence and points of view. “Viewpoint diversity” is their oft-stated goal. Also like ResearchED, however, Heterodox Academy provides another information dissemination platform for citation cartels, groups that actively suppress most evidence and points of view.

Heterodox Academy first published a “pillow fight” debate between two members of the Reform Cartel, validating Noam Chomsky’s contention about fake, within-group debates (Pondiscio & Foster, 2021).⁹ It then posted documents and hosted an online webinar produced by the Reform Cartel, replete with references to their work, along with their dismissals of others’ work (Berner, 2021).

Passive Aggressive Paradise and the Paradox of Politesse

Genuine confrontations between competing arguments and evidence are rare in education research.¹⁰ Indeed, it is widely considered “unprofessional” to identify by name a scholar whose work one is challenging, even in defense of erroneous attacks. When doing so myself, I have not

only been labeled unprofessional, but I have also been accused of holding a personal grudge -- against persons I have never met—of jealousy because my own work is being ignored—even when criticizing information suppression on topics I have never myself researched—and of making up facts—even when those facts are obvious and available for all who wish to verify them.

In this strange scholarly environment of politesse-over-truth-seeking—where consideration of a single individual's potential hurt feelings trumps consideration of public policies that may affect millions—the best one can launch is vague criticism of anonymous scholarly behavior that lands nowhere meaningful and effects no change. Allowed criticisms are those so nebulous that even the perpetrators can agree with them and then continue their unethical behavior.

Funders

Some foundations, such as the Broad and Wallace foundations, not only discourage unsolicited proposals but claim to fund them only rarely. Others, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, refuse even to consider them.

How, then, do such foundations decide where to place their investments?

They may claim to scour the earth doggedly for the most-deserving hidden gems but peruse their grant lists and you will see the most highly advertised research organizations well represented. Under their policies, those who already have get more.

To further concentrate resources into the hands of the few, some foundations, such as the Gates and the Rockefeller foundations, decided to maximize their impact by narrowing their focus, funding fewer projects, and giving the smaller number of grantees more money (Face Value, 2006; Huang & Seldon, 2014; Levin, 2018; Lubienski, Brewer & La Londe, 2016; Samali, Laidler-Kylander, Simonin & Zohdy, 2016; Scutari, M. 2018; Tompkins-Stange, 2016).

There is logic to that. Some of humanity's problems are big and solving them requires a big response. Any foundation, even that of Bill and Melinda Gates, has limited resources. If it disperses those resources widely among many little projects, the big problems may never get fixed.

But there are at least three problems with pack funding. One, big grants to solve big problems are most likely to go to big organizations, further concentrating resources.

Second, what if the proposed big solution does not work or, even worse, makes the problem even bigger still? Given the current state of affairs in US education research and its dissemination, resource concentration may fund popular, yet ineffective, programs just as easily as effective ones. Even worse, given the reduced variety of programs funded, we will end up knowing less about what might work.

A third problem, in education the big foundations tend to fund strategic scholars, who contribute new research and information only while dismissing and discrediting a larger quantity conducted outside their cartels.

One might assume that the giant funders had learned their lesson after so many policy failures over the past twenty years

Instead, they have, apparently, decided to “double down”—more money to even fewer recipients, concentrating resources still more, which will concentrate information and its dissemination still more (Barnum, 2021).

Grant-making policies at the education-focused Wallace Foundation illustrate the problems.¹¹ Their goal to fill “knowledge gaps” may be laudable. But for the many scholars with flexible attitudes towards past research, it simply invites a dismissive review. It takes just a minute to declare an absence of previous research on a topic (or declare all of it no good without citing any). It takes weeks, months, or years to conduct an honest, thorough literature review.

Paradoxically, funding dismissive reviewers to fill knowledge gaps widens those gaps. Replacing an unacknowledged, unexamined (or unliked) research literature with a single new study under-informs and impoverishes our public policies, to the sole benefit of strategic scholars.

Endnotes

¹ My critique concluded that the NRC report was not only very poorly done, but clearly biased. Indeed, it appeared to have been deliberately arranged to deliver a negative appraisal of a huge I/O psychology research literature. Literally thousands of research studies were declared not to exist. The 14-member committee included a few psychologists, but Paul Sackett was the only one expert in I/O testing. Among the non-experts were several scholars from the field of K–12 educational testing, prominent opponents of high-stakes and externally administered tests (Phelps 2008/2009).

A 29-member “Liaison Group” was assembled, filled with the topical experts that one reasonably would have assumed would be included as authors. But the Liaison Group was never consulted and had zero influence on the content of the report. Yet, their existence and membership were prominently displayed in the published volume, as if to give the appearance that they had participated in the production of a report that denigrated their own research.

² In my last job interview of the day, an employee informed me that the president was a longtime friend of some of the education professors on the NRC panel that had unfairly panned the I/O psychology research literature.

³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

⁴ The British Dylan Wiliam voted against, whereas the Australian Alan Ruby quit the committee rather than vote. Feng-Jui Hsieh of the Taiwan National University apparently voted in favor, along with Schleicher.

⁵ See, for example, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_T._Willingham

⁶ See, <https://researched.org.uk/>

⁷ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/eric-kalenze-636a5020>

⁸ <https://deansforimpact.org/about-us/supporters/>

⁹ “The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum—even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there’s free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate.” — Noam Chomsky, *The Common Good* (1998)

¹⁰ Except for some contrived debates held entirely within organized circles of researchers.

¹¹ <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/about-wallace/pages/funding-guidelines.aspx>
<https://www.wallacefoundation.org/about-wallace/our-grantees/pages/default.aspx>
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