

“Cult of the Irrelevant” with Michael Desch Policy Implications Paper

The Albritton Center for Grand Strategy hosted Notre Dame’s Professor Michael Desch to discuss his recent book, *The Cult of the Irrelevant? The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security*.

Prof. Desch offers several answers to the question, what can be done to bridge the gap between academia and foreign policymakers? He happily acknowledges that government agencies value research, noting in-house researchers and reliance on local think tanks, including the Federally Funded Research and Development Centers. But he questions their reliability in a search for real answers to tough problems, problems that scream for the quantitative and qualitative data required to challenge prevailing winds. Government officials typically conduct research in addition to other duties, and research will often get short shrift. Additionally, the bureaucracy will inevitably and unwittingly nudge a researcher to lean toward sources and conclusions favorable to certain agendas.

Think tanks, similar to in-house government researchers, are populated with people who rotate in and out of government and therefore carry biases. Additionally, most think tanks have an ideological bent, a specific mission that originally stood them up. Their work is incentivized by their donor and client base to lean toward findings both desire. All of this makes reliance on “The Ivory Tower” necessary.

While there is indeed a current bias in academia toward basic research (research done based on individual scholar interest to increase the stock of knowledge for knowledge’s own sake) versus applied research, there are still plenty of scholars who are interested in addressing specific problems policymakers confront.

Prof. Desch points to the Minerva Initiative. Begun in 2008 by then Secretary of Defense (and former Dean of the Bush School) Robert Gates, the initiative’s purpose is to support social science research that focuses on areas vital to our national security officials. Strengthening this unique initiative could go a long way toward bringing both the academic and policy worlds closer together.

There’s value in the Ivory Tower. Evidence-based research, untainted by political or bureaucratic agendas, often far removed from Washington, comes from this sphere. Many individuals within university departments, and in particular within policy schools like the Bush School, are eager to contribute years of research-based knowledge to real world problems. Washington needs to ask. The Ivory Tower needs to respond.