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Advancement of Knowledge: A Journey through Space and Time

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Abstract: Presumably, advancement of knowledge is a primary goal of virtually all “academic” scholars, whether from universities, government agencies, or elsewhere. Likewise, a primary function of academic organizations, such as the Southern Regional Science Association and Regional Science Association International, is to enable scholarly interaction that supports this goal of advancing knowledge. This paper focuses on two important aspects of advancement of knowledge as they relate to the regional science community and its scholarly organizations. The first, interdisciplinary interaction, has always been a key attraction to regional science, but a characteristic that has weakened in recent times. Especially given the nature of many issues studied in regional science, it is important to recommit to expanding the interdisciplinary reach of the discipline. The second, mentoring and supporting development of scholars, especially young scholars, continues to be a strength of the regional science discipline. We must make sure that this characteristic gets passed on to future generations of regional science scholars.

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1. INTRODUCTION

I am grateful to have the honor of delivering a Fellow’s Address to you, especially on such an important weekend for our association, as we celebrate 50 years. As I sorted through my journey as a scholar, I settled on a topic that is important to me. It is also a topic that I believe connects with what we have been as an association in the first 50 years, and what I hope we will be during the next 50 years.

Thinking about my own professional journey, two things have always motivated me. The first has been part of my make-up since I was a boy: a burning desire to do something to help others, especially those who were victims of poverty, discrimination, and injustice. However, I could have selected any of a number of different paths to fulfill that desire. I may have been perfectly content as a social worker, or on the staff of a homeless shelter, or helping a village in a third world country develop critical infrastructure, or maybe as a priest—a vocation for which many had me pegged as I was growing up. Chuckle at that, but on more than one occasion I looked at what I was going through with one of my boys and wondered whether God was getting a little pay back – reminding me that I could have been a priest and avoided all of this.

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The second motivating factor for me has been pursuit and advancement of knowledge. My parents, especially my dad who has a Ph.D. in physics, undoubtedly played a role in this. As I got connected to Economics and approached the end of college, I decided that my best option for making a difference was through advanced education, which would allow me to much better understand problems such as poverty and what could be done to ameliorate them. This afternoon, I will address this second motivating factor, which I assume is part of the make-up of just about everyone in this room.

I will focus my remarks on what I consider two critical aspects of advancement of knowledge. Some may quibble with my labels, but I tag these as “advancement of knowledge through space” and “advancement of knowledge through time.” Not only do I consider these critical aspects of advancement of knowledge, but these have played a major part in my attraction to, continued commitment to, and enjoyment of the Regional Science discipline in general and the Southern Regional Science Association in particular.

2. ADVANCEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE THROUGH SPACE

I still remember some of the guidance I received when I arrived at West Virginia University (WVU) nearly 30 years ago, fresh out of graduate school. If I wanted promotion and tenure, I needed an adequate number of solo publications in good mainstream economics journals – very simple, very concise, and very true. I could do co-authored work and it would count for something, but would get heavily discounted. I could even be really scholarly and do co-authored work with people from other disciplines, but, unless it landed in a mainstream economics journal, it did not really count for anything.

My first exposure to interdisciplinary research, or “advancement of knowledge across disciplinary space,” came through the Regional Research Institute at West Virginia University. Bill Miernyk did not have a wide-ranging group, but did have scholars from Economics, Geography, and Mineral Economics departments working under one roof. His successor, Andy Isserman, however, really opened my eyes to interdisciplinary research. At one point, the Institute had faculty research associates from 13 different departments drawn from eight different colleges at WVU. Not only were we all connected to the Institute, but a number of the faculty collaborated on research at some point in time and we all learned about the research of everyone else and often provided feedback.

Andy also introduced me to the North American Regional Science Meetings and eventually to the Southern Regional Science Association Meetings. I remember the dynamics of the migration sessions, in my early North American meetings. The sessions had a strong presence from both economics and geography and I sensed a definite “geographers vs. economists” atmosphere in terms of approaches and methods. Many of the geographers did not care much for the econometrics-heavy methods of the “arrogant” economists and many of the economists did not understand the rationale or usefulness of what many considered the less scientifically sound methods of geographers. However, the mix of disciplines at the conference grabbed my interest immediately. Partly I was open to the mix from my still relatively new experiences with Andy and the Regional Research Institute. Partly this stemmed from my gut instinct that the topics of interest to me, poverty, discrimination, urban problems, and population migration, all stretched across disciplines. Lastly, I was really caught up in the whole idea of spatial analysis, and, while some of their approaches seemed a bit odd, geographers had a lot to offer to me regarding understanding of the spatial dimension of analysis.

Since my introduction to regional science, I have seen a couple of fundamental changes in the interdisciplinary nature of our field. The first change is that the dynamics of economists vs. geographers vs. others has softened a great deal over time. In part, I would hope that this “softening” has resulted from more experience with other disciplines yielding some mixing of methods and, more generally, greater acceptance of methodological differences and understanding of the benefits of having different approaches to an issue.

My second observation, at least for the United States, is that maybe we have lost some of our interdisciplinary edge. Certainly Walter Isard envisioned a much broader array of disciplines, including economics (broadly defined), geography, planning, anthropology, sociology, political science, and history at the very least (Isard, 2003, pp. 187-193; Boyce 2004). We know that regional science never reached the wide array of disciplines envisioned by Walter Isard. In fact, regional science in North America is now much more dominated by economics than used to be the case, primarily due to declining participation by scholars from geography and planning. Many others have discussed the reasons for this in the numerous pieces about the history and future of regional science as a discipline, what we have done well, where we failed, or whether regional science should even be considered a discipline, so I will not go there today. However, if you summarize the important points of that whole literature, one recurring theme (in pieces by Andy Isserman, 1993, 1995; Brian Berry, 1995; Harry Richardson, 1995; Frank Giarratani, 1995; Niles Hansen, 1995; Janice Madden, 1995; and others) is the importance of interdisciplinary interaction reflected at our conferences, in our journals, etc. These pieces were chock full of issues, concerns, and suggestions going forward. In the end, however, you could take from all of these that, especially given the nature of the problems and issues and the focus on regions and local areas, the most important role of what we all call regional science was providing a forum for scholars open to research informed by cross-disciplinary interaction.

Unfortunately, at least for many of us, there are still major road blocks to interdisciplinary collaboration. While my economics profession has made strides by accepting co-authored research as legitimate (now the norm instead of the exception), I still see too little progress when it comes to acceptance of interdisciplinary research. Many administrators profess to value interdisciplinary research, and are delighted if it is a key that opens the door to external funds, but they often do little to back up their talk. Despite the hurdles, we cannot afford to let interdisciplinary work slip away, especially in an association like ours where so many of the issues we study cut across disciplines.

I know that some manage to work across disciplines. At WVU, my economics graduate students have been very fortunate to have the Regional Research Institute where Andy Isserman, and now Randy Jackson, continually have exposed our students to research and outstanding scholars from Geography and other disciplines. For most people, however, the ready exposure is not available and it gets too easy to slip into our own group or into our own conference sessions, without much thought as to how we might broaden our reach to bring in different perspectives and approaches. I do not have the answer for how we draw others in, but think it is an important issue for us to address on a continual basis.

As an addendum for those in economics, I see the growth of spatial analysis as a great opportunity for connecting the relatively small regional field to other fields within economics. While a small proportion of our WVU economics Ph.D. students specialize in the regional/urban field, a large number use spatial econometrics (or other spatial analysis) in their dissertations. In addition to our regional/urban students, the environmental/resource and public economics

students almost all use spatial methods. Most of these students would not call themselves regional scientists, but the regional/spatial bug is there and many continue to do work that is very much within the realm of regional science. In increasing numbers, either as students or young professionals, these scholars have participated in regional science conferences. International trade, economic development, labor economics, monetary/financial economics (regional banking) are a few other areas that are ripe for such connections.

3. ADVANCEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE THROUGH TIME

So cross-disciplinary work grabbed me and pulled me into the orbit of regional science. This was my journey through disciplinary space. The second focus of my remarks today is about my journey through time, or more generally about advancement of knowledge through time.

When I finished graduate school, I moved on to WVU. At the time, I had a very narrow perspective regarding advancement of knowledge. I could advance knowledge through my own basic research, period. I would guess this is how most of us start. At least in academia, this is how our contribution to knowledge gets measured. It has the advantage that it is relatively simple and countable. We quibble over things such as rankings of journals, books versus refereed journals, and funded research versus unfunded research, but all-in-all, we have a concrete way of measuring someone's contribution. Where does this leave Stephen Worland, my first economics instructor at Notre Dame, who turned me on to economics and guided me during my last three years of college? His specialty was history of economic thought and he was what could probably be labeled a "social" economist—concerned with "just wages" and related issues. He did not publish much in mainstream journals so was not well-known, but he turned a generation of students on to economics and his many extra hours of discussions and guidance eventually helped me to find my way, just as it did for many others. Or what about some of my graduate school professors, such as my advisor Mahlon Straszheim, or Wally Oates, or Mancur Olson. Mancur's *Logic of Collective Action* (1965) is a classic that at the very least is known to anyone who studies public economics, public choice, political economy, or political science. His *Rise and Decline of Nations* (1982) is less known but not by much. In fact it was referenced in a Time Magazine column a couple weeks ago (Zakaria, 2011) on how the United States is losing ground to many other nations—29 years after it was published, it is still relevant enough to get cited in a general interest news magazine. Yet, when Mancur tragically died from a heart attack in 1998, his colleagues and students did not focus on these classics when they summed up his contributions. Instead they talked about the many hours that Mancur generously gave of himself to consult, advise, encourage, and teach and how he was equally delighted to spend that time with graduate students as he was with well-known scholars. Mancur's contribution to advancing knowledge went well beyond his publications or his classroom teaching. How much research by others might not have ever happened if not for Mancur's support?

One way to think about this is to consider whether knowledge advances more effectively in fits and starts as periodic discontinuous leaps, versus a continuous process of small advances that provide the basis for that special person to come along periodically, synthesize the accumulated knowledge, and take us up to the next level. In the former case, much advancement is a lucky coincidence—the right person happened to get interested at the right time and got connected with the right scholar. In the latter case, we are constantly developing and nurturing new scholars, and creating a constant stream of small advances while increasing the odds of connecting with the game-changers, who will take the next big steps forward.

It took me a long time to figure this out. When I started at WVU, my first love was research. I did enough to get tenure, but I was not making the mark that I had planned to make with my work. My biggest success was working with large numbers of borderline undergraduates for whom I had become their last real hope of getting back on track so that they could walk away with a college degree and get a job. While this work with undergraduates was rewarding, it cut deeply into my research time and made my goal of advancing knowledge in a way that would lead to solutions on major issues such as poverty seem much more distant. I tended to think of measuring my success by asking whether my profession would be any worse off if I left and did something else. In terms of intellectual contributions, I was not sure what to conclude.

Andy Isserman introduced me to a whole different perspective on being an academic scholar. Andy did all of those things that I connected with being a mentor in the sense that Mancur Olson was a mentor. In fact, in many respects Andy reminded me of Mancur. As many of you know, Andy had a great intellect, endless energy, passion, and an ability to engage someone in intellectual conversation anytime, anyplace, and often for as long as a person could hold up. At first, my experience was having Andy mentor me regarding research, grant support, writing, speaking, and just about everything else. However, as Andy pulled me closer and closer to the Institute and confided in me more, I was able to see the whole picture of what Andy did for others. Eventually I got to live it. When Andy took a year-long sabbatical in 1991, I served as “Acting-Andy” for a year at the Institute. I use that term because it was not just a matter of serving as a care-taker acting director. The Institute was a lively place, with a few in-house research faculty, many graduate research assistants, more than 20 active faculty research associates from all over campus, and a MacArthur Foundation grant with nine co-PIs from five different universities, two countries, and several disciplines doing research in what at that time was still a backwater country of Bulgaria. Andy provided lots of support to all of these scholars in a variety of ways and expected that I would not miss a beat.

As an aside, that is also when Andy got me involved in SRSA by throwing me into the frying pan. First week of January, when Andy was literally five feet from the door on his way out for the last time, good-byes said, brief case in hand, he stopped and turned to me and said something to the effect of, “Oh, one more thing that you and Terry Rephann need to take care of. I am program chair for SRSA this year.” One of the best things he ever did for me.

That one year as “Acting-Andy” and the subsequent four and a half years, when I had a half-time appointment at the Institute working side-by-side with Andy, and at various times with people such as Terry Rephann, Cindy Rogers, Stephan Weiler, and Luc Anselin, were the most enlightening and thrilling years of my professional career. But of all the great memories and adventures, what affected me the most was Andy’s deep commitment to supporting other scholars, young and old. I know that Andy sometimes drove people nuts and sometimes wore people out, but if you could have seen the effort and sacrifices he made and the risks he took to support other scholars, all you could do was be thankful for his work and grateful if you were a part of it all. This is what most deeply changed me as a scholar. This also got me to recommit to our economics Ph.D. program, which I have helped to administer and worked with others to reconfigure since 1992. One of the strengths of our program and one of our best recruiting tools is the reputation we have built for being very supportive of our graduate students.

At the end of 2011, I actually will step aside from helping to administer our graduate program and for the first time since 1984 (other than two sabbatical years) will be free from an

unusually heavy dose of administrative or service duties. Soon after we got married, my wife, MaryLee, and I decided that 110 years old was a reasonable target for our lives. That gives me a little more than a half century to recharge my research so that I can earn that Nobel Laureate that seemed so much within reach at the end of grad school. However, I will not neglect the lessons learned and expect they will help my new-found research time to be more productive and rewarding for me and for others, particularly students.

Let me bring this discussion around to SRSA. This association and conference score very well on being supportive of young scholars. It is probably a gross generalization, but my experience at economics conferences has always been that at least some presenters get chewed up and spit out by their discussants, I assume discussants who somehow think this helps establish their own scholarly credentials. I do not observe this at the NARSC or SRSA meetings and, in general, think Regional Science does well in this regard. However, at the NARSC meetings, perhaps because they are so much larger and draw people from all over, I almost always see graduate students or other obviously new attendees on their own, looking a bit lost or out of place between sessions or at receptions or when people are heading out for evening dinner. The way we treat people at SRSA, especially grad students and other young scholars, is the most important reason that I have stayed involved and keep coming back. I can't tell you how many times our grad students have been blown away by the treatment they get. They are welcomed, they are encouraged, they are given helpful feedback, and they are treated more like professional colleagues than like students.

Since I have spoken about Andy a good bit, it is probably fitting to bring Judy Stallman, our other SRSA Fellow from last year, into my talk. I don't remember the year or the place, but when I think about students presenting at SRSA, the one picture that always comes into my head is of Judy sitting down one-on-one with a student presenter at the end of a session in the back corner of a conference room. A few of us were in the back of the room talking for a good while at the end of the session. Judy was with this student the whole time we were talking. Partly I am surprised that this one incident sticks because Judy does this sort of thing on a regular basis as do many others in this room.

So here is a big surprise for you—our students look forward to coming back to SRSA and many of them do their best to continue coming back after they have graduated and are on the faculty somewhere else, and some of them bring their own students or colleagues to SRSA. Supporting scholars, especially young scholars, is an important part of advancing knowledge over time. This is something we should feel good about as an association and should continue to make a priority.

4. CLOSING

I would like to close with a few personal comments about SRSA. Sometime, not too long after Andy Isserman got me hooked on SRSA by throwing me into the frying pan as program chair, Andy shared with me some of his discussion with Bill Miernyk, as Andy assumed his duties as Director of the Regional Research Institute. Bill shared a lot of information with Andy regarding the Institute. Bill, however, only left Andy with one specific charge as Institute Director—or perhaps it was more of extracting one promise from Andy. That charge was to continue West Virginia University's significant involvement in SRSA and to continue nurturing the organization. Bill cherished SRSA. Andy followed through on that charge in a big way,

introducing a whole new group of established as well as young WVU scholars to SRSA. Andy also cherished this organization. Looking around the room at the number of people from WVU and the number who have been connected to WVU in the past, I think Bill and Andy would both be pleased that, as Institute Director, Randy Jackson has continued that commitment, and that others such as Peter Schaefer and Santiago have honored Bill's wishes by stepping up into leadership positions.

Like Bill and Andy, I very much cherish SRSA. As far as professional organizations go, this is my home, and this conference is my "can't miss" conference year after year. As a scholar, I place Bill Miernyk on a plane well above me, but, for the most part, my feelings for SRSA come from the same three things that Bill noted in his video-taped address to all of us back in 2005—three things that Bill thought SRSA did successfully: (1) stimulate research by young members; (2) foster an interchange of ideas among those who are well-established in the field; and (3) promote fellowship among members who have mutuality of interest. I believe all three of these are critical over the long haul if our conference is to be continually successful at advancing knowledge. As already noted, I also believe that nurturing young scholars and stimulating their research, including their love of research, is something that SRSA has done particularly well.

For the younger generation of scholars here, if someone asks you to get more involved (as an officer, session organizer, or whatever), push aside the nervousness and the initial impulse to decline the request and just say "Yes." The organization needs you. You will not regret becoming more integrated in the association. You will have some great experiences and will get to know a lot of terrific colleagues. More importantly, whether you stay connected to SRSA or get involved somewhere else, remember how you were treated here and remember those from SRSA or elsewhere who nurtured you and mentored you while you developed as a scholar. Carry on that tradition knowing that this is an important part of advancing knowledge across generations. When I attend SRSA's 75th anniversary conference in 2036 or, assuming that I make it to my planned 110 years old, when I teleport myself to the 100th anniversary conference in 2061, I expect that much about SRSA will have changed. However, I hope to see that succeeding generations of SRSA scholars still know how to do things right, including nurturing, mentoring, and stimulating young scholars.

Finally, I want to thank the many people who played some part in naming me as an SRSA Fellow. When Nancy White first contacted me about this award, I was at a loss for words. At the time, I was in awe, looking at the list of the first 20 Fellows, several of whom are in this room. Now, after a year for all of this to sink in, I am just as much in awe. I am greatly honored to be placed with this group of SRSA Fellows who have contributed so much to the development and prestige of SRSA during its first 50 years. For me, it is a special honor to directly follow Andy Isserman, who I had intended to thank personally and publicly this weekend. Especially given how I got my start with this association, I will never be able to think about SRSA without thinking about Andy—sad that he is not here, but with a smile as I think about the times we had. Andy was not only a good friend, but also my mentor and the one person who had the greatest impact on my professional development.

So, to Andy and the many others who have helped me to find my way, and to all of you, thank you very much.

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