SYMPOSIUM: NEW DIRECTIONS IN REGIONAL SCIENCE

Size Matters: Why Regional Science Needs to Think Bigger

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As regional scientists we are preoccupied with our scientific work, and this is as it should be. But from time to time it is worthwhile to step back and think about the business of regional science—the organizations that hold us together, the publications that help us build a body of knowledge, and the meetings that give us a sense of community. When these topics come up, the conversation usually focuses on concerns about new and innovated research strategies, about research quality, and about scientific rigor. The idea, of course, is that if we are good scientists the rest will take care of itself. This is a noble idea and a naive one. In the competitive environment that we operate in we cannot, I think, operate as a boutique field indefinitely. If we do not get bigger, we run the risk of getting lost in the shuffle. I am convinced that size really does matter.

Regional science was founded in the 1950s and during its first 40 years the core group of practitioners was cohesive enough to have a shared vision that held it together. The emphasis was on graduate training and on the dual tasks of building a coherent body of theory and developing a cadre of researchers who could deliver the regional science product in a variety of settings. This is well and good. It is difficult to imagine a time in the future when these would not still be things that we would want to do. On the other hand, I would argue that we should spend more time thinking about the quantitative side—specifically, how to “grow” regional science. We have a number of options to consider, including building on our role as a field of graduate study, expanding undergraduate education in regional science, reaching out to nonuniversity-based researchers, and widening our definition of regional science to include economic development and other practitioners.

All of these approaches have merit, but the one that I am convinced has the most merit in the short term is the suggestion that we reach out to nonuniversity-based regional researchers. These researchers often come from degree programs in geography, regional and urban economics, or regional science, and as such they have a foot in the regional science camp. But getting this cohort to join us in substantial numbers is going to take considerable effort. First, we will need to have ready answers when we are faced with their question “what is in it for us?” It is not clear that the corporate culture of the nonuniversity research sector values the things that our academic corporate culture values. And second, we will need to rethink the way that we do business, i.e., the sorts of submissions that are

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welcome in our journals and the sorts of papers and presentations that are welcome at our meetings.

In my recent Western Regional Science Presidential Address (1998), I suggested that a basic commercialization of technology model could be useful for thinking about where we might take regional science. Academic regional science has concentrated on the early stages of the commercialization process. What I am suggesting, of course, is that we take on some of the downstream stages.

The Lee and Gaertner (1994) Model has four stages:

- 1) **Basic Research.** Scientific investigation driven by intellectual curiosity or by particular scientific problems. **Our response:** We are good at this! Regional science can claim a distinguished list of basic researchers and we can point to a rich scientific literature produced by regional scientists.
- 2) **Technological Development.** This step is highly focused on applied research that involves converting new scientific advances into an economically and commercially viable design or process. **Our response:** If we think of this step as having a first phase and a second phase, I think that it is easy to claim that we are fairly good with respect to the first phase but less good with respect to the second phase. Regional science has produced a great deal of high quality and potentially useful empirical work. But we have probably done a much better job of developing the prototype than we have of pushing our work to the point where the market value is obvious. Put another way, we are not reluctant to do empirical work, but we do seem to be shy when it comes to making the usefulness of our work explicit.
- 3) **Technology Commercialization.** The process of introducing a new product or process to market. **Our response:** Academic sector regional scientists sometimes do this through consulting and contract work, whereas researchers in private sector and government agency settings regularly work in this area. At present, this is a fringe area in the regional science community and it is, I think, the area with the greatest potential for recruitment. Our regional science institutions should be able to make the relatively minor adjustments necessary to accommodate researchers in the "commercialization areas." The payoffs in terms of expanded but compatible membership and a broader view of the world can be enormous.
- 4) **The Market.** Marketing, distributing products, and growing market shares. Maintenance of market usually involves quality improvement and economizing. **Our response:** There are really three faces of "the market." One face looks very much like technology commercialization. It involves fairly sophisticated tinkering with models and strategies to make them even more effective and efficient. The second face is less analytical with more emphasis on the maintenance and manipulation of

large data bases. Researchers of this sort are the ones called upon to provide data for economic development publications and presentations. There is typically an emphasis on managing secondary data, which describe regional economic and demographic trends and patterns. This is a long way from the curiosity-driven basic research that goes on in the first stage of the model, but it is at least solidly on the margins of what we claim to do. Finally, the third face is economic development practice. This is probably worth considering in another discussion; typically, these practitioners do not fit into the nonuniversity-based regional researcher category.

As for the next step, we need to grow. I am convinced that the quickest way for us to expand our numbers with minimal disruption to our corporate culture is to intensify efforts to increase representation by nonuniversity-based regional researchers. Our associations and journals will need to make conscious efforts to manage this process, but I have no reason to believe that it will significantly change the basic character of regional science as we know it now.

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