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Linking Research and Rural Development Policy: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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"I am amazed, observing some of the policy debates about rural and urban development, by the general lack of participation of regional scientists, even indirectly, in the dialogue...I see us talking to ourselves"
(Shaffer 1995, p. 224).

The late Professor Ronald E. Shaffer, distinguished agricultural economist and regional scientist of the University of Wisconsin, actively sought to bridge the divide between the worlds of research and policy making. As a young faculty member with a joint appointment in the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics and University of Wisconsin-Extension, and later through his leadership of the UW-Extension Center for Community Economic Development and the National Rural Economic Development Institute, he accumulated considerable experience working directly with communities, states and the federal government on regional development issues and challenges (Deller et al. 2006). His concerns about the notable absence of the participation of regional scientists in policy debates, expressed in an article commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Regional Science Association, should give regional scientists pause, as it is a field that claims policy relevance and applied scholarship among its specialties. This special issue grew out of initiatives to honor Professor Shaffer's work and heed his call for regional scholars to engage with policy makers.

The problem Shaffer noted is not unique to regional science. Planning, geography, environmental science, economics, and agricultural economics, among other disciplines, also make significant contributions to the understanding of urban and rural development and entertain similar pretensions to policy influence. Many of the same factors limiting the en-

agement of regional scientists in public policy discourse apply to scholars in other fields as well. Indeed, a large literature on the research-policy nexus seeks to understand the reasons why findings from academic science are frequently far removed from the policy arena, even in cases where the research is expressly intended to influence public sector decision making (Clark and Majone 1985, Cohen and Lindblom 1979, Eriksson and Sundelius 2005, Haas 2004, Meltsner 1990, Weiss 1979, Wildavsky 1987). Among the many challenges: politics influences the selective funding and use of research; problem complexity and scientific uncertainty prevent researchers from taking the kinds of firm positions that are both comprehensible and compelling to non-specialist decision makers and the public; scholarship can never be wholly objective or autonomous and, therefore, research findings are often viewed as one set of competing interests among many, not the "truths" academics often imagine them to be; research findings may be too slow in coming to influence critical issues about which immediate decisions are needed; and the communication of research findings is inadequate, frequently because it is designed not to influence decision making, but rather to weather all possible challenges from academic peers.

Several years ago I had an opportunity to wrestle with those challenges firsthand. In 2003, I undertook a partial leave from my faculty position at the University of North Carolina to direct the policy, research and strategic planning division in North Carolina's economic development agency. The purpose of recruiting an academic to the post was to bolster the organization's own research and planning capability by establishing a permanent line of communication with the scholarly community. Initially, the experiment

was imagined as simple technology transfer from the university to government: it was thought that policy ideas on the scholarly frontier in economic development, as well as new techniques for understanding economic change, evaluating policy options, and predicting policy impacts, would more flow more easily from academe to the leadership and professional planning and policy analysis staff of the agency through a liaison—someone with a legitimate presence on both the university campus and in government. Establishing an institutionalized conduit to the academic research enterprise was perceived as one solution to the research-policy divide. Better *ongoing* communication with academic researchers, with the liaison acting as a kind of broker and translator, was viewed as the foundation of a serious effort to tap scholarly expertise for economic development policy making at the state level.

The aims of this special issue are similar in spirit, though admittedly more modest in design. The issue seeks to invigorate the level of engagement between the regional research and rural policy communities by communicating scholarly expertise in a non-traditional format, one that is more accessible to decision makers than the usual forms of academic publication and dissemination. The objective is to encourage dialog by bringing the good ideas of regional scholars to the attention of policy makers through a series of short, focused issue papers. Each contributor was charged with identifying a problem or issue in their area of expertise, explaining the rationale for a government role to address the issue, and offering recommendations or directions for that government role. The only constraint on contributors' choice of topics was that the papers address a rural development issue. Authors were encouraged to imagine a testimony before a state legislature, and therefore to present their views concisely and in language comprehensible to non-specialists (never easy tasks for professors!). While the papers cover a range of issues, from arts to the environment, the set is not intended to represent an exhaustive compendium of the challenges facing America's rural communities. Rather, as a group the papers represent what a set of active regional scholars view as some of the most pressing rural challenges and concerns of the day.

Is more effective communication of scholarly expertise the only way to narrow the research-policy divide? Of course not. Like many scholars-turned-government appointees, I learned many things from donning the shoes of a bureaucrat and attempting to translate the research and policy advice of my discipline into policies, programs and administrative actions. One of those lessons is that more "technology

transfer" is clearly needed, and that such transfer will not happen without more creative approaches to conveying research findings and advice. However, I also came to understand that the flow of ideas and insights from the academy to decision making bodies and public agencies would be much richer and sustained if technology transfer also occurred in the other direction, from government to the academy.

The gulf between the types of research findings being produced in much of development scholarship and the kinds of results that can be implemented effectively in the form of legislative or administrative actions is vast indeed. I am convinced that a key reason is that the policy making process itself, and especially the role of implementation as an influence on policy outcomes, are not seriously studied in the fields and sub-disciplines specializing in urban and rural development. Academic specialization means that such topics are instead the province of fields like public administration, political science, and policy analysis, where urban and rural development issues are themselves secondary concerns.

It is hard to imagine that development scholars can significantly influence urban and rural policy choices without a deep understanding of how such policy is made and implemented, from the politics that constrain choice sets to the "government failures" that doom even the most well-intentioned and well-resourced programs. That disciplines that conduct research that seeks to inform public choices must also study (and teach about) the policy process, implementation, and the research-policy nexus itself has been recognized in other applied fields (e.g., Walt 1994), but it is not yet a widely held view in most of the fields allied to regional science. It follows that policy engagement is important to regional scholars not only because it validates their research, but also because it helps reveal the kind of work that needs to be done to translate findings into real actions. Put differently, engagement is best viewed as a learning opportunity for both sides. As regional scholars, we should actively seek to "speak truth to power," but we should also cultivate opportunities for policy makers to "speak power to truth." I suspect that is what Professor Shaffer meant when he suggested that regional scientists are spending too much time talking to themselves.

For the public sector, while there is much to be gained by narrowing the research-policy divide, true engagement requires enlightenment on both sides. The fact is that some public agencies are ill-equipped to absorb and utilize scientific findings and policy advice even when they have directly commissioned the research. In many states, the pursuit of efficient gov-

ernment has led to increased out-sourcing of applied research and policy analysis to consulting houses and universities, especially in the economic development arena. While there are clear benefits to using hired experts in some instances, and regional scholars and the institutions they teach in often benefit by becoming go-to sources for such work, near exclusive reliance on contract research and analysis can be counterproductive in a subtle and almost unnoticeable way. Staff unfamiliar with the research process, basic methodologies available, data limitations, and the unique incentives and constraints under which consultants and academics operate have difficulty designing the basic specifications of research projects that can actually inform decision making, program design, and implementation. Likewise, agencies that do not do a basic level of internal research and analysis have difficulty detecting poor or misleading analysis, interpreting the results of valid research, and translating findings into actions. Thus a vicious circle emerges: public agencies with little internal applied research and analysis capability request studies that are prone to produce results of limited utility, which in turn lowers the incentive for the kinds of sustained research-policy engagement that are likely to seriously inform decision making while also enriching regional scholarship.

It is my hope that the papers contained in this special issue will not only inform substantive rural policy debates at the state and local level, but also give decision makers a flavor of the kind of expertise that might be tapped on an ongoing basis through robust engagement with development scholars. For development scholars, it is high time to think carefully about the sources of the research-policy divide itself and how we might, in Professor Shaffer's words, truly "position ourselves as a policy resource" (1995, p. 224).

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