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Regional Science and State Rural Policy Research

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Regional scientists, with their experience investigating social and economic phenomena at different levels of aggregation, awareness of the importance of the role public and private institutions in society, and interdisciplinary tool box, are particularly well suited to provide rural policy advice to state and local governments. In spite of this, there are those who argue that faculty neglect state rural policy (SRP) research. This article explores this question and ties answers and recommendations to incentives faced by faculty and their institutions.

Keywords: *Rural; policy; outreach; institutional incentives*

Introduction

A focus on policy or practice is in the very nature of applied disciplines. Curiously, there is frequently a large communications gap between scholars in applied disciplines and policy makers (Leman and Nelson 1981; Nelson 1987; Macke et al. 2003; Indiana University Media Relations 2007; Hirasuna and Hansen 2009), so that research outputs may not affect policy until after a long lag. Nye, writing about political science, argues that “Scholars are paying less attention to questions about how their work relates to the policy world, and in many departments a focus on policy can hurt one’s career.” (Nye 2009, A15). This sentiment is echoed by Harris (2008, see particularly p. 103) and Cantor and Lavine (2006). By contrast,

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Alperovitz, Dubb, and Howard (2008); Buys and Bursnall (2007); Cantor and Lavine (2006); and Sclove, Scammell, and Holland (1998) present examples of successful cooperation between academia and policy making. These contradictory opinions suggest that the reality of university policy research is diverse and that specific conditions or situations influence success or failure. Therefore, this article explores reasons that encourage or discourage cooperation between academia and those who formulate and implement policy.

Although most of the arguments that follow might also apply to other policy research areas and disciplines, we focus on state rural policy (SRP) research as the object and regional science as the subject. Given the diversity of regions and the different impacts of many policies on them (Nizalov and Loveridge 2005), regional science, with its focus on social and economic phenomena at different levels of aggregation, awareness of the importance of the role of public and private institutions in society, and interdisciplinary tool box, is particularly well suited to provide rural policy advice to state and local governments.

We limit the scope of this study by looking only at SRP research and no other types of policy research. We also consider the perspective of universities only (universities refers to all higher education institutions) and not that of state government or advocacy groups. For a policy maker's view of the university, see Bastedo (2009). Finally, we use the terms policy research, engagement, and outreach interchangeably, although they do not have identical meanings. Our justification is that the dividing line between research and consulting is fuzzy and engagement on nonresearch projects is frequently a stepping stone toward policy research. Therefore, we believe that there is a positive correlation between engagement and outreach broadly defined, and policy research, so that success (failure) in the former is likely to translate into success (failure) in the latter.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. Section Incentives examines incentives for institutions and individual faculty to engage in SRP research. This is the supply of side of rural policy research. Section From Research to Legislation, Enactment, and Implementation discusses matching supply and demand for research, the process from research to legislation, enactment, and implementation, and how to structure the academy to encourage greater interaction between researchers and policy makers. Section Regional Science and Rural Policy Research briefly reviews the strengths of regional science as a contributor to rural policy research. Section Recommendations and Conclusions provides recommendations and conclusions.

Incentives

Since the aforementioned contradictory views concerning the status of policy research at universities (Sclove, Scammell, and Holland 1998; Alperovitz, Dubb, and Howard 2008; Cantor and Levine (2006), Harris 2008; Nye 2009) are all based on

experience and observation, we conclude that different incentives and attitudes bring about different outcomes. Therefore, in this section we address incentives for engaging in SRP research, including incentives in acquiring local institutional knowledge and other skills idiosyncratic to such research. For related discussions of policy engagement see Werts and Sandmann (2008), Boehm (2008), Harris (2008), Dubb and Howard (2007), and Macke et al. (2003).

Organizations provide incentives to influence members and align their decisions with organizational goals and objectives. Such externally imposed (extrinsic) motivation (e.g., money, promotion) competes with intrinsic motivation, which makes individuals engage in an activity without external influence, for sheer enjoyment (e.g., a favorite sport). In economic theory, preferences reflect intrinsic motivation, while sanctions and prices, including wages, are extrinsic motivators. Since individuals differ from one another, they respond to identical incentives in different ways. Faculty members who control their research agenda often choose topics about which they have a passion (strong intrinsic motivation) that may counteract external motivations produced by incentives and not everyone prefers the same trade-off between work and nonwork activities. Thus, incentives allow us to account for expected but not the full range of observed behaviors.

Universities and governments are not the only organizations providing incentives relative to policy research. Frey and Eichenberger (1992) argue that the national scale of the U.S. job market for academic economists reduces incentives to specialize in institutional knowledge at state and local levels. Since such knowledge is often needed for effective engagement, the Frey and Eichenberger hypothesis (FEH) states that the U.S. academic job market results in disincentives to engage in SRP research. Although academic regional scientists also face a national job market, the geographic focus of most of their research is subnational and thus rewards the acquisition of local and regional knowledge. The FEH therefore does not apply equally to all disciplines and subdisciplines (Schaeffer and Bukenya 2001). This is another reason why observed behaviors of engagement span a wide range.

We distinguish between institutional (university) and individual (faculty) motivations. The two are related because the university provides incentives to align faculty behaviors with institutional goals. Hence, Boehm (2008) finds a positive relationship between community involvement and institutional attitudes toward such activities, and Lee (2007) shows that institutions have more influence on departmental culture than the department's discipline. We start with institutional incentives because they shape the incentives that the university provides to the faculty.

Institutional Incentives

Universities are not homogenous but differ in size, mission, funding level, revenue sources, student body, location, alumni, donors, and programs. They face

different opportunities and constraints and have different resources to address them. Therefore, we should expect a range of institutional attitudes toward SRP research.

Given their mission and history, we expect land-grant institutions to display a greater commitment to serving the state through rural policy research than other universities, everything else being equal (Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities 1999). Because the immediate surroundings provide opportunities and motivate interest, we also expect universities in rural regions to be relatively more active in SRP research than universities in large metro regions. Similarly, everything else equal, we expect that institutions that draw students from across the United States and beyond face different incentives than regional or local universities. Grayson (2008) provides evidence that the sense of coherence (SOC) differs between native and international students. Since SOC significantly contributes to educational experiences and outcomes, the results imply that the makeup of the student body affects teaching and learning, which influences research activities. It is also possible that some universities specialize. For example, Lepori (2008) shows that nonresearch intensive regional institutions in Switzerland have become effective providers of applied research to industry, often in conjunction with teaching activities. Reminiscent of the FEH, Thornton and Jaeger claim that the national focus of research-intensive universities tends to discourage outreach and that as a result “. . . , national rankings and studies rarely recognize research universities as exemplary in one or more of the five dimensions of civic responsibility” (Thornton and Jaeger 2008, 164).

Research rankings such as those produced by the Center for Measuring University Performance (CMUP) at Arizona State University rely on relatively few measures. The CMUP ranking separates external research funding by federal and other sources (Lombardi, Capaldi, and Abbey 2007), granting the former more prestige than the latter. The National Research Council’s graduate education ratings incorporate easily collected measures such as GRE scores of graduate cohorts, time-to-degree, publications of faculty advising graduate students, and federal grants. Policy impacts, which are difficult to quantify, were not part of the rating inputs, discouraging future investment in policy efforts. An Internet search produced a large number of university statements that demonstrate that the prestige of federal funding, as reported by the National Science Foundation (NSF; Britt 2006), is very highly valued. Success in the pursuit of federal funding also helps candidates for a position in another state more than state or local funding, since the latter may require that the faculty member first establish contacts and build new relationships.

Checkoway sounds a pessimistic note about the civic engagement of research universities.

Higher education can contribute to civic engagement, but most research universities do not perceive themselves as part of the problem or of its solution. Whereas universities once were concerned with “education for citizenship” and “knowledge for society,” contemporary institutions have drifted away from their civic mission. Thus,

today's universities are uneven in their commitments, faculty members are unprepared for public roles, and community groups find it difficult to gain access to them (Checkoway 2001, 167).

However, as we have noted before, such statements overlook recent developments and important differences between institutions and disciplines. For example, Dubb and Howard (2007) show how grass root activities by community health groups lead the National Institutes of Health to increase funding for community-based research. They argue that similar efforts could produce similar results in other agencies.

Therefore, the contrast between national versus regional and local universities relative to SRP research is not as stark. While policy research results about obscure regions may be less attractive to the most prestigious academic journals with an international audience, studies about dynamic regions do not fall into this category; not all region-based research lacks an international audience. While economic power cannot be used as an argument in most rural policy studies, innovative research about issues that have parallels elsewhere can attract international attention. Therefore, institutional incentives to conduct SRP research are less uneven than implied by Thornton and Jaeger (2008), except that universities seeking to be highly ranked may pay less attention to issues that do not draw an international audience.

Funding is a strong incentive for institutions and individuals. According to the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (n.d.):

While the exact percentage differs from state to state, in 1980, states provided 46 percent of the operating support for public colleges and universities. By 2005, that amount had fallen to 27 percent. During the same period, tuition as a source of revenue increased from 13 percent to 18 percent.

The impact of the funding shift is visible in the makeup of the faculty. Between 1975 and 2007, the percentage of tenure-stream full-time faculty decreased from 56.8 to 31.3 percent (American Association of University Professors 2006, 2007); reduced permanent faculty reduces institutional capacity to conduct SRP research. One explanation for reduced support is that universities do not meet society's needs, rather than university engagement suffering from lack of funding (Alperovitz, Dubb, and Howard 2008). Based on conversations with officials in our states, we hold a different view. Nationally, various factors reduced state government's ability to fund discretionary programs, and many states have faced budget difficulties in recent years. So the state's relative contribution to the budget has declined.

The Bayh-Dole Act (P.L. 96-517) favors the pursuit of research with commercial applications (Dubb and Howard 2007; Rausser, Simon, and Stevens 2008). This 1980 patent and trademark act encouraged the creation of spin-off businesses from university-based research, by giving universities property rights over discoveries made on projects that receive federal funding. A commercially successful patent or other application can yield a share of the revenue for principal investigators, which

is a significant financial incentive to engage in research with commercial potential. For universities, it is an opportunity to generate income that reduces the impact of budget cuts during an economic downturn and the associated job creation earns them goodwill with state officials. However, it shifts incentives from conducting public policy research toward research with commercial potential. In a related finding, Rausser, Simon, and Stevens (2008) provide evidence that the decline of government research (formula) funding at land-grant institutions has shifted efforts from public good (basic) to private good (applied with commercial potential) research.

Today's students pay a greater share of their education than twenty years ago. As a result, many universities increasingly view students as customers and their approach to recruitment and retention is becoming market-driven. While increasing tuition leaves total funding constant or even rising, the new revenue comes with incentives to spend it on improving the university's position in the market for students (Anctil 2008). This may help explain the recent increase in competition to recruit students with high-quality recreation and living facilities (Reisberg 2001; Douglass and Keeling 2008).

Another perspective on engagement in SRP research is how incentives differ between organizational units within the same university. There are significant mission differences between administrative units such as the trustees or board of governors, the president, the provost, deans, departments, bureaus, institutes, and centers (Stahler and Tash, 1994). Incentives to engage with state and local governments differ accordingly. Extension is an example of a unit with strong incentives, since outreach to the state is its core mission, and the geographic focus of many of its activities is rural. Since Extension is often a line item in the state budget, the attention paid to legislators' priorities can directly translate into budget adjustments.

Extension activities also provide an illustration of the complementary relationship between service to and research for the state. Outreach activities can lead to applied research projects because they result in better knowledge of the state and its needs on the part of faculty and in better understanding of the university's capacity on the part of the state. Units such as public administration, public policy, regional planning (Checkoway 1998), agricultural economics, and rural sociology also have incentives to work on SRP, since projects can often be integrated into student learning experiences.

Closely related to regional science are university-based bureaus of business and economic research that are typically affiliated with economics units. Nationally, two or more units like this are found in most states; many can be found via the Association for University Business and Economic Research Web site. A center at the University of Tennessee produces state-economic forecasts and legislative policy sessions. Through state and other contracts made possible via these service functions, it is able to support a large research staff. The Regional Institute at SUNY-Buffalo is also large, but instead of economists, it is composed primarily of planners, who offer ideas on various opportunities for development. The focus of the institute is its own

region, but it also participates in national work. Our two examples show how applied centers can be major sources of revenue, data, and research for their host units.

Accreditation bodies also encourage public and professional service (e.g., Planning Accreditation Board 2006), providing strong incentives for engagement. In applied disciplines, communities provide laboratories that can enhance the quality of teaching and contribute opportunities in applied research. However, travel time is an issue for students, because they cannot afford conflicts with classes (Bednarz et al. 2008), and project sites that do not require an overnight stay are preferred. Thus, constraints on travel provide an incentive to engage in outreach activities locally. This is one of the reasons why a university's location influences the focus of policy research and why great urban universities are underrepresented in rural policy research. Boehm (2008) finds that negative incentives to state policy research are relatively more effective than positive incentives. Although there are negative incentives (e.g., Frey and Eichenberger 1992), positive incentives frequently outweigh them.

Regional science attracts scholars from a variety of applied professions and disciplines. Isserman (2004) provides a detailed analysis of citation counts in the field of regional science. Among the ten most-cited scholars in top regional science journals between 1990 and 2001, seven are economists, two are planners, and one is jointly appointed in agricultural economics and planning. Similarly, a review of the membership list of the Southern Regional Science Association (SRSA 2007) shows predominance of economists and agricultural economists and also people appointed in a broad mix academic social science and policy departments along with government employees. The applied, multidisciplinary mix of regional science suggests that positive incentives for SRP research may outweigh the negative incentives.

People working in applied fields can help policy makers; sometimes a grateful recipient responds in an unexpected way. In 2002, the local government specialists from Michigan State University learned that a former county commissioner had endowed a chair in state and local government public finance in recognition of county budgeting advice over the years.

Individuals' Incentives

Individual academic careers go through stages. During the first stage, the focus is on building a record that merits promotion and the award of tenure; failure could mean the end of a university career. The short time to achieve the goal makes conventional, low-risk projects a safer choice during this stage. Academics who are past this stage are in a better position to take on projects that carry higher risks in terms of publishing opportunities or to spend time to see that their published research will influence policy makers. However, they may continue to rely on the strategy that earned them promotion and tenure. Youn and Price (2009) found that institutions can counteract this possibility. They report that tenure in the California State University

system was based on academic merit, but promotion in rank was treated differently. “The criteria for promotions include a measure of commitment and loyalty to the organization as well as ‘institution-specific’ knowledge and skills” (Youn and Price 2009, 232).

Faculty who are able to successfully balance disciplinary excellence and policy relevance can gain significant personal benefits. An example from regional science is George Treyz. In his career at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Treyz published in top journals and used the same work to create a comprehensive regional economic modeling system of relevance to policy makers. The models ultimately led to the formation and growth of a consulting firm. Policy makers are increasingly asking universities about firms that spin out of university research, so the benefits of such successes also accrue to the university.

Academics derive personal satisfaction from having their research influence policy (Boehm 2008). Intrinsic motivation may be high for projects with great potential impact. Recognition and prestige from being part of a highly visible project is reward in itself. This does not exclude the possibility that some faculty may avoid work that creates a high profile outside their discipline but within the state, because taking time to cope with an onslaught of requests may distract them from scholarly pursuits that attracted them to the academy.

Many projects attract attention only in the aggregate and long run, not as individual efforts, and thus provide no reward in the form of recognition and prestige. The research of Boehm (2008) demonstrates the important effect of institutional attitudes toward engagement on faculty members. Overtime, faculty who become reliable policy advisors should be able to obtain agency support to answer policy questions that also fit the into a research agenda. The legislative process and implementation are two points where ongoing faculty-state policy-maker collaboration can be valuable. Therefore, the next section is dedicated to policy making and implementation.

From Research to Legislation, Enactment, and Implementation

In this section, we discuss the connection between academic research and its implementation. Hirasuna and Hansen (2009) lay out obstacles to the use of social science research by state legislators, such as conflicting conclusions or contradictory results. The large number of research outlets does not facilitate finding relevant studies, and specialized language (jargon) does not contribute to understanding. All these factors contribute to delay.

There is a good supply of SRP research, including two relatively new outlets: *Online Journal of Rural Research and Policy* and *Regional Science Policy and Practice*. However, it seems that not all demands for rural policy research are met equally well, a concern also raised by Hirasuna and Hansen (2009), Feser (2007), Macke et al. (2003), and Shaffer (1995). Feser also raises the question of an agency’s ability

“... to absorb and utilize scientific findings and policy advice ...” (Feser 2007, 2), an issue we do not address.

Research Process: Matching Supply and Demand

Most rural policy research in refereed journals was not produced for a specific state agency. Hence, there is little prior coordination between producers and prospective consumers. Inevitably, this results in less-than-perfect matches between available research and policy questions. Partly this can be explained by faculty incentives. Everything else being equal, results that apply primarily to one region tend to have less appeal for the most prestigious journals than studies of problems shared by other regions, particularly if similar studies have already been published. This is not a serious barrier if the project requires a relatively small effort or if the agency offers access to information that provides a new perspective to a problem. In the first case, the cost is commensurate with the reward; in the second case, there is the potential reward in terms of publishable research.

State agencies can lower risks and increase expected rewards by establishing ongoing relationships with academics who have demonstrated their interest and skills. In such cases, less promising projects may become stepping stones for larger, more interesting research. In Michigan, the State's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has partnered with academic units to fund tenure track positions that are oriented toward DNR research needs. The DNR complements faculty salaries with research dollars for field work. While this example is focused on biological and resource conservation orientations, similar arrangements could work in regional science. Michigan's Economic Development Corporation is partially funding a fixed-term faculty position oriented toward regional economic forecasts. In Minnesota, the state government funds a tenured position that focuses on state budget forecasting. West Virginia funded a new faculty position to support a successful all-volunteer outreach program. McDowell (1992) offers a political economy model of university engagement with stakeholders. As long as the beneficiary can detect a gain that is more than the cost of providing political support, and as long as the resource is likely to be needed in the future, political support is likely to be forthcoming. The key is the repeat nature of the engagement. Onetime interactions are unlikely to provide significant long-term benefits to the faculty member or the institution.

The relatively recent devolution of policy responsibilities from the federal to the state level has increased opportunities and the need for SRP research (Dubb and Howard 2007). Through strong partnerships that fund positions, the agencies signal that investing in specific knowledge about the state government and the legislative process has just become less risky. Just as research institutes and centers appoint faculty who contribute actively over a period of time as research affiliates—without pay—maybe state agencies could also offer such titles. This would send a strong signal to university administrators and faculty peers regarding the significance of the

work. A formal relationship might also make it easier for the agency to justify sharing its data. Another strategy might be for agencies to be more aggressive in seeking to employ faculty on sabbatical. In general, if state agencies want access to faculty research time, they may be more successful if they align rewards with the university priorities such as publications, grants, student opportunities, honors and awards, and national recognition.

Legislative Process: Public Goods Nature of Published Research

People sometimes appropriate findings from published research and interpret them to fit a context for which they were not intended. One possible way to lower the probability of misuse of is to become involved in the process. The roles of the economist in making public policy are discussed by Nelson (1987) and Leman and Nelson (1981), and with minor qualifications, also apply to other members of the regional science community. Hirasuna and Hansen (2009) and Macke et al. (2003) add insights to working at the state level.

The measures to enhance incentives for faculty to engage in SRP research are largely the same as those proposed in the discussion on matching supply and demand. In the case of the legislative process, long-term associations are particularly valuable to both sides. Mutual trust is also enhanced by ongoing relationships. In states with term limits, it may be difficult to establish such relationships directly with legislators and a focus on aides or policy analysis units may be more productive. Michigan State University, with a term-limited legislature, employs a variety of techniques to create links between faculty and policy makers:

- The Institute for Public Policy and Social Research conducts regular noon-time seminars for legislators and aides. The seminars address current topics of debate.
- The Vice President for Government Relations follows legislative agendas closely and matches faculty to committee leaders where appropriate.
- Legislators are invited to serve on a variety of university advisory boards.

Enactment and Implementation: Finishing the Job

The impact of legislation is not fully established once it has been enacted. Sometimes there are unanticipated conflicts between the new and an existing law that limit the effect of the new legislation or policy program. For example, a welfare-to-self-employment program in West Virginia met an obstacle in the form of a U.S.\$2,000 limit on assets that welfare recipients could own before they lost welfare benefits. This limit was too low to build a sustainable business. Therefore, the program was doomed to fail unless the limit could be raised; engagement with the project helped create awareness of the problem and it was corrected (Smith 2000).

With most policy changes, there are winners and losers. A key principle to maintain faculty interest in policy research is administrative protection from parties whose vested interests may be placed at risk by the research. Ongoing relationships of the sort discussed above will contribute to faculty participation at this stage of the process and for the same reasons. Trust relationships can also relieve the tension between the scientist who wishes to carefully study an issue and the policy maker who needs the answer for a briefing with only a few hours' notice. Scientists are more willing to provide an educated guess about impacts of pending legislation if they are confident they will not be quoted.

From ad hoc to Formal Market for SRP Research

The common recommendation in all parts of From Research to Legislation, Enactment, and Implementation section is the establishment of ongoing/long-term relationships between producers and consumers of SRP research. This is critically important if we are to transform an ad hoc market for research into a more permanent and predictable market. Greater stability reduces risk and makes entering this market more attractive to producers and consumers alike. Since the value of policy research tends to be cumulative, it also enhances the long-term quality of the product.

Regional Science and Rural Policy Research

All social sciences contribute to rural policy research. Regional science does not claim a monopoly. Because of its multidisciplinary nature, however, our scholarly community is in a good position to address rural problems that rarely can be fully answered by one discipline alone. Many members are accustomed to working in multidisciplinary teams.

A second strength of regional science is the awareness of space. Failure to account for spatial interactions where they exist will distort results. The attention paid to what is happening below the national level complements the spatial awareness. The central questions of regional science are (1) why do regions develop in different ways and at different speeds? (2) what influences the internal structure of regions? Regional scientists therefore have an incentive to acquire place and region specific knowledge; without it they cannot answer these questions.

Recommendations and Conclusions

As expected, we found incentives that favor and incentives that discourage SRP research. The extent to which incentives affect the production of rural policy

research differs between and within institutions. Faculty engagement research shows that through their attitudes and stated values, universities have considerable influence on faculty motivation to engage in outreach (Lee 2007; Boehm 2008; Thornton and Jeager 2008).

An individual rewarded with tenure has been given a market signal that scholarly publications are desirable. Institutions that fail to alter the economic signals given to individuals' post-tenure may find that legislatures are reluctant to provide general fund budgets and expose themselves to institutionalization of narrow metrics such as state dollars per bachelor's degree produced, instead of broader gauges of the institution's relevance to its host state. While top-level administrators often see the value of policy work, chairs and peer reviewers may not. Top-level administrators can mitigate these competing interests by working to cooperate with agencies to create funding that can attract faculty to perform policy work that is science-based and responsive. Although market considerations are likely paramount in early career stages, tenured faculty are less mobile, so other factors probably cement the orientation toward SRP research.

State agencies and the legislature can also influence faculty motivation, beyond the obvious tool of budget allocation. For example, it is easier to include doctoral students in SRP research, thereby also increasing the future supply of state policy scholars, if the market for such research becomes more stable and predictable, rather than ad hoc.

Finally, academic disciplines often neglect to research their own behaviors. For example, we have argued on theoretical grounds that the FEH does not apply equally to all faculty and disciplines, but an empirical test of that hypothesis has not yet been performed. While regional scientists operate in a national and even international job market, their research focus is usually subnational, implying that specializing in specific regions or industries—one often implies the other—is an efficient career strategy. It would also be useful to understand what motivates faculty who are engaging in SRP research, and how they are rewarded. Such studies would go a long way toward a better understanding of why and how faculty members contribute to SRP research. In addition, such research would reveal if there are systematic differences in faculty engagement by university type. This knowledge could contribute to greater institutional recognition, which should reinforce faculty incentives to perform state policy research, in general.

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