Institutionalizing regional science

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Abstract. Regional Science is alive and well. If we wish to maintain our position we need to explore ways to expand our numbers and the constituencies that we serve. Expanding undergraduate and graduate teaching programs, fostering more discussion of client-driven work at our meetings and in our journals, and actively encouraging participation by non-university based researchers and even regional development practitioners are all ways to promote multiple-constituency regional science. If one of these options is to be emphasized in the short term, I would suggest encouraging participation by non-university based researchers and more discussion of client-driven research. These strategies are often at least partially in place now, they benefit from the rigorous scientific work that is our core business, and they will help assure the institutionalization of “full service” regional science.

Introduction

Regional scientists do interesting and useful work. If we look at the years since the mid 1950’s the list of people who have called themselves regional scientists is impressive. Similarly their contributions to science, to strategic planning, and to policy development have been substantial. Our worldwide networks have never been larger or stronger. We have had our setbacks, but on balance, regional science is alive and well.

In the remarks that follow I would like to do two things. First, I want to talk about some of the challenges that regional science faces as it moves into the competitive academic market place and the private research sector.

Based on a presidential address to the 37th Annual Meeting of the Western Regional Science Association, February 20, 1998, in Monterey, California.
of the 21st century. I suppose that the contemporary term for this first theme is “sustainability”. I am not going to assert that we are in big trouble but I will assert that we should be continuously evaluating our position in the market place and planning strategically to exploit our competitive advantages. Second, I would like to offer some thoughts on how we might be even more proactive in our efforts to reach a more broadly defined constituency.

**Constituency-based institutions**

All of us are probably sick of TQM – total quality management. The basic concepts have a great deal of merit although it sometimes seems that those most intent on living a life dedicated to TQM are the same people who use airline magazines as management texts. And no matter how vigorously we resist thinking of students and association members as “customers” or try to avoid using terms like “continuous renewal” we can recognize that there may be some very real value in doing these things. When all is said and done we know that we are operating in a competitive environment, we know that there are dozens of scientific and professional organizations competing for a finite number of members, and we know that an almost bewildering array of meetings are chasing travel funds that seem to be growing ever scarcer.

The situation is tough for mainstream disciplines. For fairly specialized multidisciplinary fields like regional science it is even tougher. We (regional science) have a very attractive product, but we can not afford to take a field of dreams “build it and they will come” approach to this business. We need to continuously reevaluate our market position and we need to be proactive when it comes to maintaining existing markets and developing new ones. In the pages that follow I will explore these ideas and offer some thoughts on how we might more efficiently and effectively exploit the niche that we occupy.

**A perfect world**

Ideally regional science would have a built-in clientele that would have little or no choice when it came to joining our associations. This is certainly the case with licensed professions e.g. law or accounting. Licensed professions have a built-in demand for graduate training and perhaps even undergraduate training. They have practitioners who look out for their welfare when there is a challenge from university administrators or politicians. They have a market for their graduates. Their scholarly and professional organizations have a regular and stable source of members and at least part of their agenda is devoted to maintaining linkages between the academy and the outside world.