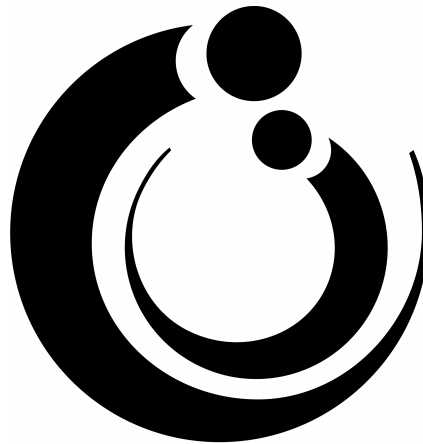


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The Future of Applied Demography

Keynote Address for the 8th International Conference
on Applied Demography

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THE FUTURE OF APPLIED DEMOGRAPHY

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APPLIED DEMOGRAPHY

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TITLE SLIDE

I want to thank Frank Goza and the other organizers for inviting me to speak this afternoon. It is an honor for me to give the keynote address at the 8th Biennial International Conference on Applied Demography. Like some of you here today, I attended the first Conference on Applied Demography in 1986. I am very impressed at how the conference has grown, the facilities have improved, and our field has matured.

Tom Merrick described the 1986 conference as an important milestone of the evolution of this field. Prior to the first conference, many of the efforts of applied demographers during the 1970s were to “seek ways to achieve greater recognition and identity for demographers addressing applied questions. Many of these early efforts were aimed at creating greater sympathy for the work of applied demographers among their more academically and research oriented colleagues.”

In contrast, the 1986 Applied Demography Conference focused attention on the substance of applied demography. Most of the time was spent discussing how demographic data, concepts and methods could be used to better inform business and public policy decisions.

It was exciting and fun to meet demographers from a variety of settings. I had no idea how many demographers worked for various religious denominations, for instance. Everyone was eager to share what they did and how demography contributed to the mission of their organization. Dave Swanson reminded me that we also discussed how state and local demographers could work together with business demographers to respond to the threats to federal statistical system. I think many of these discussions occurred over a few beers at the bar.

In recognition of how far applied demography has come over the past 25 years, I want to consider the future of the field. As it stands today, applied demography has no collective vision of its future in a rapidly changing world. I decided to talk about the future of applied demography because this conference gives us a rare opportunity to explore together the possibilities for our field. Ironically, although demographers are in the business of making projections, we haven't focused our forecasting lens on our own field.

My goal here is to identify some forces influencing the future of demography, propose some new, common goals, and challenge us to work together to take some actions to achieve them. ***The purpose of my talk is to move applied demography from our present state as a quasi-social science that tolerates practitioners to a professional field that nurtures them.***

SLIDE 2

This purpose stems partly from Tom Merrick's remarks at the first conference when he said that

“ Because of their outward orientation, applied demographers need kinds of professional support and exchange of ideas (not to mention training) that do not rise spontaneously either from within the profession of demography or in the outside fields where they expend most of their professional effort.”

(Merrick, 1986, p. ix)

SLIDE 3

Before I review forces affecting our field, I want to describe the current state of applied demography. The issue of what is applied demography has been debated many times at this conference. Some have argued for a definition based on the unit of analysis, some for a definition based on place of employment, and others have argued that applied demography is a decision-making science.

For the sake of convenience, I merely distinguish applied demographers from their mainstream counterparts. This distinction was originally made by Tom Merrick at the 1986 conference. “The applied demographer is concerned primarily with bringing the methods and materials of demography to bear on questions that typically arise outside of demography, in business or public affairs, whereas the “mainstream” directs most of its energy to building and extending the knowledge through research and teaching.” Note that the two groups are not mutually exclusive. There are many of us who work in both spheres.

In making this comparison, I took as a starting point what applied demographers and mainstream demographers have in common. Demographers work on projects in contrast to other occupations whose work is continuous (like accountants) or task based (like manufacturing). Projects can be as large as the decennial census and as small as answering a question about the number of people in a particular place. Projects begin in response to a stimulus and produce some output. Demographers use a common set of materials and methods in their projects.

There are fewer applied demographers than mainstream demographers. You may be surprised to learn that nearly one fourth of the membership of the

Population Association of America is interested in applied demography, as measured by subscriptions to the AD newsletter. To get the number of mainstream demographers I merely subtracted this number from the PAA's membership count.

While mainstream demographers work exclusively in universities or non-profit think tanks, applied demographers are employed in a variety of settings. Perhaps the essential difference between applied demographers and mainstream demographers lies in the source, the inspiration or the motivation for the project. Clients ask applied demographers questions and that starts a project. Mainstream demographers, on the other hand, respond to questions or issues arising from the scientific literature or each other.

While mainstream demographers produce research articles and lectures, applied demographers produce numbers, narratives, and custom analyses in a variety of forms, some of which are listed on the slide. Applied demographers rarely focus on explaining individual behavior, as is almost standard in population studies.

Applied demographers rarely compete for grants, they pursue jobs and contracts.

Applied demographers are expected to base their analyses on the population that their client is concerned about which can be big or small, defined by standard or custom defined boundaries. Mainstream demographers, on the other hand, usually base their work on a large data set based a large, nationally representative probability sample.

SLIDE 4

I am focusing on the future of applied demography because I want to help you. Only by assuring the future of the field, can we be ensured of jobs.

There are many ways to think about the future. Since my purpose here is to be thought provoking, I am merely going to review some trends that pose serious challenges to our profession.

Changes in information and computer technology have already had a profound impact on our field. Now we can have the computing power on our desktops that was formerly only available at a few large population centers. The internet has led to major changes in the dissemination of information.. Now. These technologies have led to improved productivity that small business can exist and compete favorably with larger companies. Data mining proposes to do away with the traditional, laborious way that demographers perform data analyses. Information technology has enabled globalization.

Demographic data is now widely available. Demographic data has been democratized. Now anyone with the right amount of money and it isn't much, can

buy a CD and spin a demographic analysis or two. This poses a challenge of when do you need a demographer? Do you need a demographer to find data? To understand data? Or to use demographic data as the basis for action?

Widespread data has led to information overload. People are overwhelmed by the enormous amount of statistical information about the United States. How to make sense of this? The challenge is to synthesis a narrative out of the numbers. The sheer overload makes it easier for people to first decide on an action to take and then to find evidence to support it rather than to digest the data and then decide on an action.

The information overload poses a threat to the public's perception of demographers as able to make sense of the mess.

Another threat to the profession arises from the combination of data availability and information technology. The public associates demographers with demographics, which they view as breaking the population up into well-defined groups and inferring behavior from attributes. Data and technology are now so available that it is possible to collect a lot of information about particular individuals and use it to individually tailor products, and advertising promotions.

Government resources provide jobs, support many of the data sets we produce and analyze and fund university research and training. We are fortunate that in 2000, unlike 1986, many governments have adequate resources. The improved fortunes of the federal government have led to increased availability of research funds from the National Institute on Aging and the National Science Foundation.

Nevertheless there are shifts going on in government resources. One shift that may have a dramatic impact on the field is the new way that population centers will be funded. For nearly 50 years, population studies in the U.S. has been dominated by population centers at a few, large research universities. Now competition is to be opened to many more centers.

This push toward decentralization is occurring at the same time as major shifts in the profession. Because so many demographers are baby boomers and pre-boomers, there have been and there will continue to be many retirements. We have already witnessed the retirements of a few major figures like Ansley Coale and Ronald Freedman, and the deaths of such figures as William Brass. Some demographers, like Jerry Wicks, retire from one job and set up their next one as self-employed consultants.

Another set of threats to the profession come from the changing work life. The business world has been revolutionized by the need to appease Wall Street's stock analysts on a short term basis. The time orientation of work has changed so that everything is fast pace, real-time, quick turnaround. This trend also

contributes to the broader array of tasks in a job – which may reduce the need for specialists, like demographers.

Taken together, these forces suggest that we cannot assume that the future will merely be a continuation of the present. Therefore, we need to identify some new goals.

SLIDE 5

In light of the trends discussed previously and the purpose of my talk, I have developed some goals for Applied Demography as a profession. The first goal is seamless communication among practitioners, academics and students. This goal is a prerequisite for further development. Many practitioners are individual operators either within a larger organization or by themselves. While the internet makes email seamless, many people feel uncomfortable making “cold calls” or emails to people they don’t know. So we need more events like this conference that bring everyone together and encourage net-working.

The second goal is to make practitioner work and careers more visible. Why do this? A few years ago, I was fortunate to be a NSF Visiting Professor at the Population Research Center at the U of Texas at Austin. The number one question I was asked was (by both faculty and students) - what do you and other applied demographers do in your jobs? This was one reason that a team of us compiled the first collection of case studies in applied demography. This is still the number one question I am asked so that leads me to believe that we haven’t figured out how to address this goal. Only by making applied work more visible can we recruit new people into the field. Perhaps we need to consider some new approaches to this, like a videotape showing applied demographers in action at their desks and doing their jobs.

The third goal is to build public understanding of demography. Demographic data is getting more widely available every day. Some of you do this every day by interacting with the public build awareness of different kinds of information. For example, there is little understanding of which numbers are census counts, which are estimates and which are projections and the pros and cons of each type of information. We will need to do a lot of this kind of work in conjunction with Census 2000, with the undercount and the new race and ethnicity categories. Applied demographers have more regular interactions with the public.

The fourth goal is to increase the availability and relevance of training. Since demographic data has become so widely available, many people who use them were never trained in demography. For example, a reporter on my local newspaper, The Ann Arbor News, has become the local data maven. It is in our best interest to try to train them if nothing more than to minimize the number of mistakes. I suggest that the number of short courses be increased. Applied

demographers need to be trained in ways that are relevant to what they will be doing on the job.

The fifth goal is to incorporate practitioner work into academic research and knowledge base of the field. If we don't do this there is the risk that students won't receive the training they need in appropriate techniques like projections. This is a tremendous opportunity for researchers. It can make you aware of problems that you never recognized. One of the best examples of this is Stan Smith's research on evaluating population projections. It is really sad that there is so little on-going research on developing better demographic approaches to small area estimates and projections. For too long we have relied on the census bureau to do this research. If demographers don't address these problems, other academic disciplines will step in to fill the gap.

The sixth goal is to expand applied demography internationally. I would like to suggest two approaches. One, which has been done with some success, is to encourage participation by colleagues at foreign universities at U.S. conferences. For example, there has been a small but noteworthy participation in previous Bowling Green conferences. Another approach, which is largely untried, is to include demographers who work for international agencies like the United Nations, and the World Health Organization.

SLIDE 6

So, with these 6 goals, how to proceed? I have identified some actions that we can take. I have identified these actions by different groups.

First, the Population Association of America (PAA) needs to expand the bandwidth of our network. Currently, the applied demography group is connected by a listserv administered by Shelley Lapkoff and the Applied Demography newsletter. The electronic communication needs to be expanded to include web based dissemination of the newsletter, of case studies, and other means to capture the knowledge generated by applied demographers. The Committee on Applied Demography needs to grow its resources so that it can subsidize speakers from outside the field or outside the U.S., as well as student tickets to the annual breakfast. Also, it is very important the the PAA figure out ways to enable practitioners to give the types of presentations that are typically given in applied settings. This includes making lcd projectors available and allowing submissions that are powerpoint slides. Networking events – this was done by goal.

Next in order to further make communication seamless and raise the visibility of practitioner work, universities and practitioners need to develop closer ties. This could include advisory committees for population centers, adjutant faculty appointments, internship programs for students and consulting arrangements. Population Centers need to broaden the discipline/college base of their members

to include representatives from business, public policy, public health, and other professional schools. They should also teach more courses for non-degree training, such as web based instruction.

Practitioners need to be open to closer ties with universities and volunteering their time. It will pay off in recruiting efforts and maybe also in improving your products and services. Also, as they encounter thorny problems in their work, it would help if they could keep a list of ideas that could generate research projects by students or faculty.

The Bowling Green conference could facilitate the transition by having a different kind of session – one where practitioners and researchers jointly discuss challenges and wish-lists.

Finally, students need to be proactive to get what they want. Remember you create your own career!

ENDING

In the past few minutes, I've taken a look at the future of our field, applied demography. And here, in a nutshell, is what I see. Changing information and communication technology, data availability, government resources, work life, and shifts in our profession each pose serious challenges. These challenges hit right at the heart of our field, including who is a demographer, what is demographic work, how to train demographers, as well as challenges to our materials and methods.

I'm convinced that we need to ***move applied demography from our present state as a quasi-social science that tolerates practitioners to a professional field that nurtures them.*** If I've convinced you as well or even raised your awareness about our field, then our time together has been well spent.

References

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