

Comments by Glenn W. Fisher on receiving the Wildavsky award from the Association for Budgeting and Financial Management, Atlanta, Georgia, October 20, 2006.

This has been an eventful year. On the first day of February, I was seriously injured in a freak accident. In September, John Bartle emailed that that I would be given the Wildavsky award. Such occasions led to reflection about what your life has meant. The outpouring of good wishes from friends, colleagues, and even casual acquaintance that followed the accident reminded me that we have an impact even when all we do is smile at someone in the hallway. This award suggests that my work as had an impact among those who opinion I value highly. It is unnecessary to add that the Wildavsky award is a lot more fun than being hit by a forklift. THANK YOU.

I would also like to thank all those teachers, students, colleagues, public officials, and lobbyists who have helped, but naming them would take all my time. I will just mention my wife, Marvel. We have been married 57 years; have three great children and four grandchildren. We have an old-fashioned marriage in which she put my career ahead of her own. Thank you Marvel.

Growing up on a Missouri farm in the “dirty thirties,” I remember the County Extension Agent helping my father plow furrows and dig holes to control swarms of grasshoppers that were devouring our crops. Later in the day, neighbors came to the “demonstration” to learn how to do the same thing on their farm.

I suspect many of those who came had not graduated from high school, but they all knew what a university was. It was a place they sent their children to be educated for agricultural and non-agricultural occupations. It was a place where scientists worked to

develop new crop varieties, new methods of cultivation, and new methods of pest control. The extension service was the arm of the university that brought that knowledge to the farms—even if it meant plowing furrows and digging holes.

Later, I would learn of another side of the American university. When I asked a mathematics professor the practical value of his research he replied, “I don’t know and I don’t care. All I know is that the problem has never been solved and I want to solve it.”

These incidents represent two aspects of the American University. The German model of research-oriented graduate education, first introduced in America at Johns Hopkins University, emphasizes the expansion of knowledge in the traditional departments. Land grant universities and the imitators emphasize the application of that knowledge. The two ideas live together in American Universities, but not always peacefully.

Professors have learned that in spite of many administrators’ attempt to encourage interdisciplinary research and outreach to the community, the safest road to promotion is to publish research in a disciplinary journal. Administrators often react to public demand by establishing centers or institutes for interdisciplinary research and service. Even then, directors of these centers often feel it wise to insure “respectability” by seeking joint appointments in traditional academic departments for their faculty members.

Public administration and the closely related activities of public policy research and service have been a focus of controversies in many universities. Public administration is often offered as a specialty in political science departments, but many teachers of public administration have found the environment unsatisfactory. In my own university, the

break came when a superbly qualified candidate for a tenure-track position was turned down after he said in an interview, “I’m not really a political scientist.”

I believe that such hostility is unnecessary and wasteful. Perhaps my viewpoint was affected by childhood experiences with agricultural extension agents and my later contact with institutional economics at the University of Wisconsin. These economics professors’ drew heavily upon other disciplines, were very much oriented to practical problems of public policy and administration. They often served in public capacities. My major Professor, Harold Groves, had served in the Wisconsin Legislature and in the Wisconsin Revenue Department.

The institutionalists were proud of their contributions to public policy. John R. Commons “invented” and sold the idea of workman’s compensation and Edward Witte headed the staff of the cabinet level committee that drafted the social security legislation, and he is often called the father of social security.

The department valued multidisciplinary contacts and viewpoints, but did not neglect the contributions of more conventional economics. John R. Commons believed that industrial accidents were part of the cost of production and that workmen’s compensation would fairly distribute that monetary cost to the consumers of the product. Edward Witte believed that the cost of producing goods should include the cost of retirement for those who produced them. He felt strongly that Social Security should be “insurance” and, except for some overweighting of low earnings in the calculation of benefits, the original social security retirement program was founded on insurance principles. Welfare for those who did not qualify for retirement benefits was kept in separate welfare programs such as Old Age Assistance, and Aid for Dependent Children.

The last speech I heard Witte make, he warned about politicizing Social Security by departing from insurance principles. In some ways, the Wisconsin institutionalists foreshadowed the current emphasis upon the market as a decision maker, but, unlike many today, they also were strong believers in the separation of government and business.

If there is anything unusual about my career, it is the number of disciplines in which I have been active. I have been a professor of economics, professor of government and public affairs, professor of political science, professor of urban affairs, and professor of public administration. Moreover, that does not count two years as head of the department of commerce and temporary instructor of mathematics at a small southern college.

The first of my work to attract national attention, the multiple regression analysis of state and local expenditure, was inspired by curiosity about the reasons for variation in the level of public expenditure that I discovered while doing state tax studies. Harvey Brazer, who hired me to help with a tax study in Minnesota, was experimenting with regression in his analysis of municipal expenditure, and I wondered if it could be used at the state-local level. When I explained the problem to my dean at North Dakota State, he hired an undergraduate who for most of an academic year spent ten hours a week using a mechanical calculator to compute all the squares and cross products needed to correlate expenditure variables with demographic and economic variables. Later I expanded the number of variables by punching data into IBM cards and carrying them across campus to the Illiac 2 computer at the University of Illinois. An article based on that data became one of the most quoted articles ever published by the National Tax Journal. I had expected that conventional political science methods might be used to explain the

residuals, instead researchers concentrated on refining the regression analysis. Perhaps this is an example of becoming too intrigued by a research technique.

My latest major publication, *The Worst Tax? A History of the Property Tax in America* was possible because I had studied the details of the property tax and its administration in several states and taken several courses in assessment procedures. I then spent much time reading and pondering David Easton's work on political systems. I knew that there was a symbiotic relationship between the property tax and the American system of many overlapping local governments. After reading Easton, I understood why a hundred and fifty years of attempting to apply the "principles" of public administration had failed to produce good property tax assessment. In our society, the survival of the political system takes precedence over normative theories of taxation or administration. Proposition 13 was passed in a state with an excellent assessment system that produced accurate up-to-date assessed values. The amendment was opposed by most of the leaders and interest groups in California, but it passed overwhelmingly. In Easton's terms, the stress was so great that the system had to be modified to survive. I find it painful to admit that accurate administration was a major contributor to the overwhelming passage of Proposition 13, but those who give public policy advice should heed the example. Normative principles can be applied only if the system can survive. In my mind, the connection between the political system and the property tax was emphasized when the Thatcher government in the United Kingdom tried to weaken local governments by replacing the property tax with a poll tax. The results were riots in Trafalgar Square and Mrs. Thatcher's resignation.

I firmly believe that academic and outreach activities are compatible in our field, and, I suspect, in many others. Research on current policy questions provides data, access, and ideas for journal articles and books that are valuable to others in the field.

There are pitfalls. It is easy to become so caught up in service activities (manhole counting) that one doesn't get around to writing the journal articles. Others are so excited by writing journal articles that one forgets to "touch base" with reality.

College professors are a freethinking group of people who are caught up in their own discipline and specialty. That is as it should be, but we need to respect, and learn from those in other disciplines or those who use a different approach to solving problems.

As Gary L. Miller, the newly appointed vice-president for academic affairs at Wichita State University, suggested in his inaugural address, we need an environment of *positive turbulence*, a climate of constructive change that builds on creativity, innovation, and renewal. I would add, *respect for those with whom we differ*. That will permit us to earn our salaries and repay those who have permitted us to enjoy one of the greatest careers in America. Thank you again.