

Welcoming Remarks at the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology's

Biennial Research Conference

Opening Session

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I am pleased and honored to be asked to welcome all of you to this, the first biennial research conference sponsored by the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology and hosted by the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics. As many of you know, this conference series was begun as an annual event by the Bureau of the Census in 1985, and they held 11 highly successful Annual Research Conferences. As you will see from my later remarks, I think that the FCSM's agreeing to take on this responsibility was a fine development, in keeping with the contributions that the conference makes to the wide array of agencies that make up our Federal statistical system. This event complements the other biennial event of the FCSM, the "Seminar on the Quality of Federal Data." This seminar brings FCSM products more broadly into the public domain, opens up the conversation about all the varied aspects of data quality among statistical agencies, and explores topical ideas for new statistical policy working papers.

I am struck, looking over the program for this conference and thinking about the past conferences, at the wide scope of topics that are discussed. These conferences serve as a forum for Federal statisticians and others interested in the work that we conduct to share ideas and developments in survey design, statistical methodology, operational techniques, and analytic methodology. Through such sharing, incremental advances are steadily made, enhancing the work of all our agencies and partners in the private and academic sectors. This perspective on our work for the next three days reminded me of some thoughts I recently read in Jared Diamond's recent book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. In speaking of the development of modern technologies, Diamond notes,

"My two main conclusions are that technology develops cumulatively, rather than in isolated heroic acts, and that it finds most of its uses after it has been invented, rather than being invented to meet a foreseen need".

He notes that most inventions are developed by people driven by curiosity, without any specific demand in mind – in some respects, they reflect a love of tinkering! From his perspective, which he argues convincingly, individual inventiveness is not as important to the overall creativeness of a society as is the *receptivity of a whole society to innovation*. Why is it that some societies enjoy the fruits of tinkering, and embrace new ideas, concepts, and inventions? That is the subject of the much of this fascinating book, and not to the point in my remarks today. The small point I would like to stress is the importance for a society of this concept of being receptive to innovation. I am viewing our Federal statistical system as a society here. If we are to develop and thrive, we must be open to new developments, small and large, wherever they originate.

We must also look out for new ways to utilize such developments, for as Diamond's remarks also indicate, the most important uses of inventions are typically dreamed up following the invention, and the original purpose for which an invention might have been developed may disappear completely. To quote him just once more,

"...Invention is often the mother of necessity, rather than vice versa."

Without addressing such concepts in so many words, the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology has been supporting such complex work since 1975, when it was originally chartered. In her letter of invitation inviting statisticians to serve, our late friend, Maria Elena Gonzalez, said,

"The FCSM will focus on recommending standards for statistical methodology to be followed by Federal statistical agencies. The Committee shall investigate problems which affect the quality of Federal statistical data, as well as make suggestions for improving statistical methodology in Federal agencies."

The Committee works to share ideas among statistical agencies, drawing widely on statisticians across the Federal government by inviting them to serve on the committee and, more broadly, on subcommittees addressing important issues. The work confronts problems identified by statistical agencies, but it also, and perhaps more importantly, benefits from serendipitous advances. These stem from the collegial nature of the work on statistical policy working papers and this conference. I see these research conferences as major opportunities for statisticians from across government, the private sector, and academia to meet, exchange ideas, and advance our work through incremental improvements that will lead in directions we cannot predict today. And this, of course, is an excellent goal that we all benefit from! Truly none of our agencies could achieve it alone, but as a society of statisticians we can make unimagined advances.

So, for their efforts, I congratulate the FCSM, COPAFS, and all involved in supporting and carrying out this conference, with the knowledge that important ideas and developments will be shared over the next three days. In the years to come, we will be able to look back and understand the full importance of some of these.

And now, it is probably past time for me to introduce the two very distinguished speakers who you really came to this session to hear. We are so pleased this morning to have John Bailar and William Barron as our keynote speakers. I shall introduce them both now, to avoid interruptions during the proceedings.

If we didn't know better, our first speaker, John Bailar, might look as if he can't hold a job. After receiving a BA from the University of Colorado, and an MD from Yale University, he worked in several positions at the National Cancer Institute. He evidently decided he needed some additional formal training in statistics, and picked up a PhD in statistics from the American University. Since then he has served – to highlight only a few of his prestigious positions -- as a lecturer in biostatistics at the Harvard School of Public Health, as a senior scientist at the Environmental Protection Agency and then at the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion at DHHS, as a professor and chair of the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics at McGill University, as a Scholar in Residence at the National Academy of Sciences, and as Chair and Professor of the Department of Health Studies at the University of Chicago where he is now. He has received numerous high honors for his work, including being a MacArthur Fellow; serving as a member of the Editorial Board of the New England Journal of Medicine, serving as a member of the Institute of medicine, and receiving the Distinguished Service Medal from the Council of Biology Editors. This is only a brief selection of highlights from his career and honors, so we are honored indeed that John will share with us some of his thoughts on the important role of statistical analysis in developing public policy.

Bill Barron has had an exceptionally distinguished career in the Federal statistical system. He is currently the Deputy Director of the Bureau of the Census. Before that, he served as Deputy Under Secretary of Commerce for Economic Affairs at the Department of Commerce's Economics and Statistics Administration. Before joining ESA, Bill had a highly distinguished and long career throughout the Bureau of Labor Statistics, where he gained deep and broad experience in managing statistical operations and issues. He served as the Deputy Commissioner of BLS for 15 years, and was the Acting Commissioner for two years in the early 1990s. Bill also has received numerous public honors and awards for his work and service, including most recently the National Public Service Award in 1998. We are twice honored, today, for Bill will share with us his thoughts about the contributions that researchers make to Federal statistical programs. He will discuss some of the qualities and characteristics that distinguish successful researchers.

We have about 75 minutes left, so I will ask each of our keynote speakers to limit their remarks to about 25 minutes. After each speaker, we will have a question and answer time of about 10 minutes. If we have time at the end, we can have general questions and comments on both presentations.