

Keeping Us Honest



■ Trade and Transportation

By Thomas O'Brien

For those of us in the academic and research community, it is a constant challenge to make sure that our work remains useful and relevant. That's often a difficult task. Our reputation – sometimes justly deserved – is that we sit in our ivory towers pursuing lofty ideas that don't have much impact "in the real world."

The goods movement industry can be a particularly tough audience for the work that we do. Until very recently it was rare to find someone engaging in formal logistics and supply chain management training in school. The assumption was that you had to learn on the job. But we have come a long way in helping to prepare students for the wide range of job opportunities available in global logistics, and that has helped foster valuable relationships with industry partners.

I've been thinking about the industry-academia partnership as I prepare to moderate a session called "What Researchers Need to Know about Industry" at the upcoming METTRANS-sponsored National Urban Freight (NUF) Conference here in Long Beach. The conference takes place October 12-14 and is designed to examine the impacts of

goods movement and international trade in metropolitan areas.

This will be the fourth NUF conference. It's unique in its theme of urban freight, and contributes to our understanding of how freight and international trade affect urban areas. In the past, the conference has been a showcase for studies on topics as diverse as private investment in port infrastructure, ship emissions, truck parking in congested cities like New York, employment generated by trade, and the success of policy measures like off-peak gates at the ports and clean truck programs.

The varied nature of the sessions has helped draw participants from not only universities but industry and government as well. But there are times when it's apparent that we still don't talk the same language or share the same goals despite our common interest in freight. "What Researchers Need to Know about Industry" will give practitioners an opportunity to share their stories about surviving a global recession, anticipating changes in everything from regulatory requirements to labor costs in China, and tell those of us who are educators how we can (or possibly can't) be of use in helping figure it all out.

As I put the panel together, I have been conducting an informal survey of practitioners – people who work in all segments of the industry from third party logistics coordinators to representatives of rail companies. I hope to get a sense of the critical issues that need to be addressed in a forum like the one we'll be having at NUF.

Some common themes emerge. One is data. Researchers rely upon data so that our work is grounded in reality. Industry appreciates this but is concerned about the proprietary nature of the information that they generate. But as universities produce research products that are recognized as valuable to the private sector and to government, then the latter two become more willing partners in the research process. Given the diverse nature of the industry, a number of practitioners I spoke with commented that universities play a pivotal role both teaching about and studying a wide array of topics that help shed light on the behavior of certain goods movement stakeholders. Some of the more apparently confusing behavior comes from the regulatory environment. But I also heard questions about why trucks idle at port gates and what drives warehouse operators to locate where they do. Policy analysts, economists and real estate experts at our schools can help in these areas.

For more information on the National Urban Freight Conference, please visit <http://www.mettrans.org/nuf/2011/>.

In the good news-bad news department, it's possible that recent economic woes may drive researchers and industry closer together. Leaner operations mean more opportunities for outsourced services; and my informal survey showed evidence of a few recent cases where universities have been used to generate data, conduct studies or even develop software that might otherwise have been done in-house. These volatile times have created a particular demand for data analysis that accommodates rapidly changing variables like the pricing of transport services, equipment availability, and the impact of events like the Japanese tsunami and earthquake on global supply chains.

One recurring problem appears to be how researchers and industry find each other. We tend to read our own niche trade publications, stick to our own business and social gatherings, and that's usually enough to fill the day. But by finding ways for us to share our research findings with business on its home turf, we can create communication channels that provide constant feedback on the work being done at the university, and better assess the impact on the ground. If the National Urban Freight Conference provides one more opportunity for that exchange to take place, so much the better. We may learn that a strategic supply chain extends into the classroom after all.