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# Establishing a Local Research Center at a College or University

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This article presents basic information for those interested in starting a local research center. Relying largely on our experiences in a small college environment, these practical concerns became apparent as we developed our Center for the Study of Local Issues.

## CSLI

The Center for the Study of Local Issues (CSLI) was established in 1978 at Anne Arundel Community College in Arnold, Maryland. Our goals are to teach applied research methods to students and interested faculty, to provide faculty with applied research opportunities and to produce high quality, low cost information for the area served by our college. Faculty and students work together to develop, refresh and exercise research skills by helping solve local problems facing business, government and community organizations. In addition, the center operates as an educational clearinghouse, linking academic resources with community and regional needs.

CSLI has provided expertise to a wide variety of community organizations. Among the projects we have undertaken:

- Field research resulting in a book for the handicapped that assesses the accessibility of business, recreational and government facilities in the county
- Interviews, for the county Office of Economic Development, of over 150 chief executive officers from local businesses to assess attitudes toward business operations and expansion

- A survey for the county executive to provide him with a better understanding of citizen attitudes about the way in which work was done by county departments and agencies

Since our inception, CSLI has held community workshops focusing on such topics as youth and sexuality, the family, gun control, futuristic thinking and stereotyping. During the last few years we also have conducted some workshops around the country for faculty members who are interested in learning about community-based applied research.

### **Choosing a Model**

Beginning a local research center requires "vision." The group of action-oriented people who start the center need to share a view of the end product. Words like "mission" and "goals," as vague as they seem, must have a defined meaning for all those involved. Professional staff, support staff and students need to understand the center's guiding principles and the originators of a center need to consider factors such as the importance of cost effectiveness, faculty development, innovative pedagogy and choice of funding sources. Knowledge about the research center's general structural model is useful in establishing the center's "vision."

The list of models we offer here is by no means exhaustive. However, in the national workshops we have conducted, we have found these models either support an existing notion or stimulate the development of a hybrid version. We offer these four models as a starting point.

*A center created by administrative mandate.* The college president, dean or board of trustees create a local research agency as an extension of the college mission.

*A center which is an appendage of an academic department.* Social science or business departments or divisions recognize important community-based research needs and a center emerges to accommodate these needs.

*An extension of a college institutional research office.* The internal research functions performed by the college institutional research office may be directed outwardly into the community.

*A foundation-sponsored agency.* Under the college's fund raising foundation, a separate non-profit agency is created to handle local, community-based research.

Knowledge about these general models is helpful but to be viable your research center also will need to demonstrate specific external and internal needs as well as supports.

### **External Needs: Who Needs to Know What**

If you are affiliated with a college which is primarily a teaching institution, you may be told that your college “does not do research,” that your institution “doesn’t have the capability to do research” and, of course, that “nobody wants your research anyway.” These are common misconceptions.

Here is a list of some of the groups and individuals who have contacted CSLI in the last two years:

- Local hospital
- Department of parks and recreation
- City police department
- Office on aging
- Commission for the arts
- Two small research firms
- Veterinarian
- Two neighborhood community associations
- Two churches
- County health department
- County library
- Three local newspapers
- County department of drugs and alcohol
- Local hardware store
- Radio station
- Metropolitan television station
- Interested citizens
- Local politicians
- Group of local clergy

While CSLI did not undertake projects for all those on our list, we conducted research for many. At this point our relationship with our parent institution is one in which serving those listed above is a logical evolution of our college community service mission. This is a position which is valuable to our college and our community and, of course, to us.

Our markets range from small to large clients with the modal client being a small to medium size organization with a small or non-existent research budget. A little work on your part may be very important here to make a local business or government office recognize the need for applied research expertise.

What is the role, if any, between the applied research center and the growing linkage between college and business? For those who view the business and college relationship solely in terms of job training, the idea of an applied research center's involvement with business may seem novel. However, it makes a great deal of sense when it provides students with marketable skills and serves as a resource for local economic data.

Here are some examples of linkages between businesses and our applied research center:

- A survey of the business climate among a cross-section of firms. Student interviewers were trained and met with local executives to learn their views on the county as a business location, their company's growth plans and their assessment of selected county services. The data were used as an employment-counseling tool.
- A market survey for a small town with a growing tourist industry. The tourism council commissioned a study of visitor's socio-demographic backgrounds, their reasons for visitation and their spending patterns. Faculty were recruited to gather and analyze the data. Results are being used to define target populations for advertising purposes.
- An evaluation of the effectiveness of a media campaign conducted in a large city. A marketing firm commissioned the applied research center to gather longitudinal data to assess the impact of an image enhancement campaign. The results are being used as a measure of accountability.
- A readership poll by a newspaper in a rural mountain locality. The applied research center developed an instrument, trained students and analyzed the results. The information is being used to assign priorities for newspaper stories.
- A biannual survey of consumer trends conducted by a college's students and faculty and sold on a subscription basis to local businesses. The results are helping local business personnel plan inventories and promotion campaigns.

Community-based research centers can help meet the information needs of local businesses while training tomorrow's workforce in necessary research skills.

### **An Internal Assessment: Identifying Needs and Supports**

The complement of a receptive environment is a receptive internal organization at your institution. It is very helpful for a college administration to actively

support applied research as a part of the institution's mission and as a form of faculty development. Institutional commitment of resources and moral support is important in the beginning and in the future. If, in addition, a number of faculty members have an interest in interdisciplinary applied research, research training and a willingness to work on "problem-centered" rather than disciplinary specific projects, the center has excellent prospects.

A word of caution: Don't assume faculty will be lining up at the door to participate! Faculty generally will say that a center is a good idea and they would like to get involved "sometime." Do not base your faculty participation estimates on a "do it sometime" commitment. Based on our experience, "sometime" usually means "never."

We have found two important factors which guide us in faculty inclusion on projects:

- A passion for doing the project, augmented by money. Enthusiasm is a good start, but don't let your colleagues "do you favors." Pay faculty participants. Volunteers may not assign the same priority to a contractual obligation as a client or center director.
- Do not assume that basic research skills directly translate to applied research skills. Faculty may need retraining or, at least, redirecting.

A center is an excellent opportunity for students to take part in the process of information generation. Your academic program should allow students to select practical research internships, applied research courses, independent study options as well as less formal opportunities for involvement. While graduate students have long been involved in an apprentice relationship, we have found that many undergraduates (even at the first year and sophomore levels) handle research responsibilities very well.

A local research center can provide a number of valuable experiences for students. They can receive job experience, credentials, access to a network of opportunity, money, college credit, extra credit and, of course, information. Students can make major contributions to the center through their involvement in technical, managerial and clerical projects. Completing center work appears to have a positive impact on student self-esteem and builds recognition of social science research as a credible and practical experience.

Our center runs an intern program for selected undergraduates, in our case first year and sophomore students. At CSLI interns engage in applied research and receive exposure to a broad range of social science research techniques. We expect each intern to be able to do the following:

- Conceptualize a research problem with a community research client
- Learn and apply basic research design
- Learn and apply questionnaire design and question construction
- Learn and apply computer software
- Develop a basic understanding of descriptive and inferential statistics
- Learn and apply report writing skills
- Assist in supervision of CSLI telephone surveys

In addition to evaluating student, faculty and administrative resources at your college, you should consider and assess the following:

- Community-centered mission
- Valuable connections with the community (networking)
- Available hardware (e.g., buildings with conference rooms and accommodations for the center; telephones; duplicating machines; computers)
- Support services (e.g., accounting through the college business office; printing through the college printshop; catering, food service; support staff including secretarial, legal and work-study assistance)

Finally, here are a few simple but important guidelines. Don't buy anything your organization already has that may be used or reworked for your purposes. Remember, too, that you don't have to invent a new procedure if one already exists. On the other hand, take the initiative to invent a new procedure if one doesn't exist.

### **Important Considerations**

Since this article only covers the basics of getting started, where we stop is where you begin. Based on our experience, we would like to suggest the following:

*Find a team with a passion for the project.* CSLI staff have been approached by numerous persons who have received sabbatical leaves, grants and leaves of absence to "study the feasibility" of a local research center. While thorough study is valuable, a center actually emerges where there is enlightened enthusiasm and feasibility. Even those research centers supported by large grants need energetic leadership. Dedicated support staff also are essential; poor support staff—secretarial, data entry/analysis—will sink a viable operation.

*Don't wait for a grant.* Our concern here is that you may wait a very long

time, get fatalistic and quit. Multiple solutions exist to the problem of starting a research center. As we mentioned earlier, you already probably have many of the essentials.

*Create a base of operation which minimizes overhead.* Use what you have. You may have to redefine current facilities with the telephones in the faculty offices becoming a "phone bank" and the copy center emerging as a local "publishing house" for your reports.

*Get institutional support.* Applied research is very often (maybe always?) political and successes and failures can reflect positively or negatively on the college. Seek and obtain at least "moral support" from your president or the appropriate dean. After you've established support, try to keep college officials aware of what the center is doing. Administrators hate surprises.

*Do a high quality, successful project.* Showing your strengths and abilities in research may be the best way to dispel damaging stereotypes and obstacles to this endeavor. A demonstration project funded by a local agency (a newspaper, government agency or business, for example) may be designed to financially "break even," but gain credibility. Here are some possible categories of "first projects:"

- Conduct surveys (e.g., telephone or mail)
- Host local public and professional workshops on important issues
- Initiate projects with other research agencies (solicited or unsolicited)
- Hold professional seminars on conducting local research
- Create a local information network
- Develop evaluation research projects

*Applied research is a multidisciplinary activity.* No single discipline owns applied, problem-centered research. The center should draw information from a variety of subject areas and professionals. The authors of this article, for instance, represent three different academic disciplines.

## **Conclusion**

Creating a successful local research center produces a variety of valuable outcomes. A center can teach, produce information and support faculty development. In addition, it can become a source for employment opportunities now and in the future. A local applied research effort can make local research an acceptable and valuable part of the mission of a community college or university.