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Using Research and Engagement to Inform Policy Making

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Tomkins in The Community Psychologist (2008) 41(3/4). Copyright 2008, Society for Community Research and Action. Used by permission.

Using Research and Engagement to Inform Policy Making

~Alan J. Tomkins,
University of Nebraska Public Policy Center

The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center specializes in policy-relevant research and engagement activities in five areas:

1. Access to Government Services
2. Application of Information Technology to Health & Human Services Delivery Systems
3. Behavioral Health and Human Services
4. Public Participation in Policy Making
5. Water Resources

In its ten years of operation, the center has worked closely with a broad range of stakeholders. For example, in Nebraska we regularly work with offices in the executive branch of government (e.g., governor's and lt. governor's offices, many divisions of the Health and Human Service System, Corrections, etc.), the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature (senators, committees, and legislative and committee staff), and the judiciary (e.g., the Nebraska Supreme Court, the Nebraska Court of Appeals). Our projects have involved community and faith-based organizations, advocacy groups, private foundations, not-for-profits, employer/business representatives, and residents. Somewhat naturally, as the only public university in the state, much of the center's activities are with policymakers and other stakeholders in state government, although we also work with local elected officials and communities across Nebraska. An increasing part of our work, however, has been with federal offices such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The Public Policy Center has demonstrated its ability to develop processes in which diverse stakeholders create a common vision: a statewide study bringing vested stakeholders (including custodian and non-custodian parents) together to agree on criteria for child support collection and distribution; a statewide study including public and private organizations developing a vision for and implementing a study of the perceptions and experiences of minority and disenfranchised individuals in the state's justice system; and a statewide project to integrate behavioral health services at the local and state levels and to expand access through the inclusion of faith and community-based organizations. Through its collaborative processes, the Public Policy Center has achieved success in both the process of undertaking policy analysis as well as changes in systems and processes. The center regularly convenes statewide conferences, trainings, meetings, and stakeholder groups representing diverse viewpoints and constituencies.

The center collaborates with faculty and students across the university, but most of our work is conducted by center research staff and graduate and undergraduate students. There are currently twelve researchers with backgrounds in:

- psychology (3)
- psychology-related fields (2)
- law (3)
- agricultural economics (1)
- business (1)
- nursing (1)
- political science (1)
- public health (1)
- social geography (1)
- sociology (1)

(Note: Three of us are jointly degreed, and we all take pride in our multidisciplinary collaborations.)

At this time, we have two clinical psychology graduate students working at the center, one graduate student in educational psychology, one in law-psychology, and one in sociology. There are ten undergraduates—interestingly, the modal major is political science and international studies.

At this time, the center balances nearly forty projects. Many of them are small, or the project involves a center researcher for just a small portion of time, but several are quite large and extensive. For the past five years, the center has obtained external funding ranging from $1.5M to $2.6M, averaging slightly less than $2M annually.

One project this past year was especially interesting. In the spring of 2008, the Public Policy Center was asked by the city of Lincoln to coordinate the public input activities the mayor wanted to undertake. The goal was to inform him and the city council on Lincoln's budget and spending priorities for the year. Lincoln decided to "budget for outcomes," and, as part of this process, the mayor wanted to involve the public. The center used five different public input techniques to get the information for the city:

1. A random digit dial (scientific) telephone survey of 605 residents was conducted (including oversampling of minority residents).
2. A deliberative discussion (modeled on deliberative polling techniques developed by Fishkin) was held. This six-hour session included 51 of the survey respondents.
3. Data from a non-random survey was collected, allowing residents to submit their answers to budget priority questions online or via "hard" (i.e., paper) copy. Over 1,200 residents responded.
4. Five town hall meetings were held. Nearly 200 residents came to these meetings, all of which were attended by the mayor and city department heads
5. A small focus group was held.

All in all, we worked with several other organizations in the effort, most notably and actively the Lincoln Community Foundation (the primary philanthropy organization in Lincoln) and Leadership Lincoln (the community's primary leadership organization). Nearly 2,000 residents provided input as part of this initiative.

We measured the public's confidence in the government, their perceptions of fairness, and their knowledge about the city's budget and its spending. One of the most significant and promising of the findings was that when we worked directly and extensively with the public in the deliberation effort, there were marked increases in their confidence in the city, in their perceptions of fairness of the budgeting/spending process, and, what is more, the residents' knowledge increased substantially on most of these items that can be seen as so critical to the civic process. Most importantly, the policy makers relied on the information provided by the public. The mayor and council routinely referred to the public's input as they negotiated the city's 2008-09, $165M budget. We are currently obtaining post-budget data from city officials to document the extent to which they found public input to be successful. Stay tuned!

Author's note: Alan J. Tomkins, JD, PhD, directs the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center. The center's website address is <http://ppc.nebraska.edu/>. Alan can be reached via email at <atomkins@nebraska.edu>.

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