Engaging Academic Experts in Statistical Agency Research

2014 FCSM Statistical Policy Seminar
December 15-16, 2014

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Engagement necessary to meet mission

- **ERS Mission**: Inform and enhance public and private decision making on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural development.
Nature of ERS–University interaction

- Stakeholder input to identify data and research gaps
- Research collaboration
- Use of ERS data
- Technical advice
- Review of products, programs, and staff
University partnerships take many forms

• **Support a program of research** through competitively awarded agreement (often includes funding from USDA program agency)
  – The Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs (BEN Center) and the new Duke-UNC USDA Center for Behavioral Economics and Healthy Food Choice Research (BECR Center) focus on the application of behavioral economics theory to the development of strategies to promote healthy food choices.

• **Partnership** with university for small grants program
  – RIDGE Centers, UK Poverty Research Center

• **Project level cooperative agreement** between ERS and university researcher to meet need for expertise. On occasion cooperative agreement supports sabbatical at ERS

• **Review of product or program** via peer review or expert panel
Questions to ask when engaging academic colleagues

• Be clear on WHY you engage with academic colleagues
  – Fill gap in expertise, including knowledge of state and/or local issues
  – Partnership to strengthen ERS capacity
  – Benchmark program/project

• WHO to engage with?
  – Nature of the research problem
  – Expertise, availability and reliability
  – Independence and objectivity vis a vis research question including potential conflicts of interest
Questions to ask when engaging academic colleagues (cont)

• WHAT is the nature of the relationship to ERS staff?
  – Close partnership often linked to uncertainty in research process: Cooperative agreement
  – Arms length agreement for a specific deliverable: Grant
  – Staff driven relationships: more collaboration, but risk of favoritism

• HOW to structure research agreements?
  – Identify concrete deliverables: models, ERS publication, journal article, seminars. Require progress reports.
  – Engage graduate students who may spend time at ERS
  – Length of agreement linked to research question, typically 2 years with potential to extend up to 5 years
  – Use of a competitive process for large amount of funding or goal to attract new research expertise.
Conclusions

• ERS research and statistical programs engage with academic colleagues along multiple dimensions.
• Define terms of engagement based on goals
• Establish specific deliverables and require regular reports on progress