

Forging Relationships with Academe

Thomas A. Louis, PhD

Research & Methodology

U. S. Census Bureau

Department of Biostatistics

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg SPH

Why engage with academe?

- “Big Data” has amplified the need for research and innovation by Federal Statistical Agencies (FSAs) to maintain leadership, and remain relevant
 - Bob Groves has stated,
“Innovate or die”
- There is convergence of goals and methods in the survey, biomedical, astrophysical, econometric, sociological and many other domains that sets the stage for increased collaboration with academe
 - The St. Louis Fed notes,
“Academic research is valuable because the thinking about economic issues is unrestricted. It is proactive . . .”
- So, yes, engage with academe to accomplish specific tasks
- But, at least as important, engage to energize intra-agency research and culture, broaden and deepen impact, recruit high-quality staff and collaborators

Engagement methods and issues

Methods

- Interagency Personnel Agreement (IPA)
- Schedule A, contract, Consultant
- Cooperative agreement
- Pre- and post-docs
- ASA Fellow
- Pathways Interns
- Short, **medium, and long-term** relations

Engagement methods and issues

Methods

- Interagency Personnel Agreement (IPA)
- Schedule A, contract, Consultant
- Cooperative agreement
- Pre- and post-docs
- ASA Fellow
- Pathways Interns
- Short, **medium, and long-term** relations

Issues

- To the degree possible, shield academics from most of the bureaucracy
 - Even getting a DUNS number can be daunting
 - Ditto for federal travel
- Clarify the rules of engagement
 - Explain the differences between grants and contracts
 - Explain approval processes and intellectual property rules

Census medium to long-term engagements

The full monty

- My three-year IPA as Associate Director for Research & Methodology, and Chief Scientist
 - Administrative roles identical to the other ADs
 - Goals/roles of R&M and consequently of the AD include,
 - Energize research and the research culture at the bureau
 - Collaborate, innovate, tech transfer
 - Pro-actively engage with academe, other FSAs, and other potential collaborators

Quite full monties

- Other IPAs, medium to long-term consultants, schedule As
- The Census Scientific Advisory Committee (CSAC)
- The Federal Economic Statistics Advisory Committee (FESAC)
- Synthetic Microdata and the Microdata Analysis System
- The NCRN
- RDCs

The NCRN and RDCs

The NSF-Census Research Network (NCRN)

- 8 universities with projects that address high priority research issues
- Staffed by faculty, pre- and post-docs
- Multi-way linkages
(Census staff) \iff (NCRN researchers) \iff (NCRN researchers)
- Twice-yearly workshops and many webinars
- The NSF as granting agency enhanced prestige and visibility

Research Data Centers (RDCs)

- 13 core locations and 4 branches, with more to come
- 170 research projects, \approx 700 researchers
- Proposals are reviewed to assess value to the Census Bureau
- If approved, and after qualifying for special sworn status, access to data not available to the general public within a secure, physical space administered by the Bureau

These connections are great, but FSAs also need to enhance their visibility & impact

- Via publication, presentation, professional service
- **Beyond proceedings:** Encourage and reward publication in the peer-reviewed literature
 - The intention to submit improves quality
 - Dealing with referee reports increases comfort (well, at least familiarity!) with external peer review
 - Encourage publication in journals that aren't focused on survey methods, e.g. *JASA*, *JCGS*, *JEBS*, *Biometrics*, *AJPH*, . . .
 - Promotes generalization and broader communication
 - Educates those not embedded in the survey culture
- Foster a more academic culture for some FSA employees
 - Scientific peer review; early, middle, and penultimately
 - Personal vesting in projects, and the consequent responsibility
 - A bit more "I" along with the "we"
 - Author-identification on reports

Amplify the research reputation and impact of FSA staff

- To increase the attractiveness of working at and working with a FSA
- To better serve the nation
- Energize the two-way street between FSAs and academe
 - Encourage staff to attend JSM sessions that aren't survey related
 - Develop workshops with broad appeal
 - Develop an enhanced role for the Chief Statistician of the U. S.
- Facilitate external data access, but with appropriate controls
- Support the nascent Chief Methodologist Network, currently Eltinge (BLS), Schenker (NCHS), Young (NASS), and Louis (Census)
- Implement ideas in,

*Facilitating Innovation in the Federal Statistical System:
Summary of a Workshop (2011), NAP*

Finding the sweet spot

- Relevant research and development is too important to leave completely to outside vendors, whether in academe or industry
 - If too little research is conducted or led by FSA staff, the work may not be sufficiently relevant and there will be too little internal research traction and action, too little ownership
- However, required research is too multi-faceted and immersion-demanding to expect FSA staff to do it all
 - It's impossible to staff up internally for everything
 - In any case, external engagement is essential to keep pace
 - As is an effective internal culture
 - These are equally important in academe
- The sweet spot will be agency-, project- and technology- specific
 - So, monitor and adapt

Debriefing on my IPA

- Deep immersion in Census administration, research, and production
- Consequent, enhanced understanding of the breadth and depth of Census work along with the constraints
- The opportunity for a positive impact both within and outside the bureau
- The opportunity to serve the nation
- An enhanced appreciation of the overlap of survey goals and methods with those in other domains
 - Has generated new research areas for me and opportunities for student involvement
 - Will develop a course at Hopkins that emphasizes the connections
- Provided opportunities to represent the bureau:
2014 Gulf Cooperation Council Inaugural Event, Muscat Oman

Issues

- Reduced contact with Hopkins Biostatistics
- A more complete description of the roles and responsibilities of an Associate Director would have been helpful
- An experienced, politically savvy and respected Assistant Director is essential

Coda

- My IPA has been and I trust the third year will continue to be a rewarding and fulfilling experience
- Three years is just right as is 80% & 20% (total is 140%):
 - Sufficiently long and intense to learn the culture and have some impact
 - Sufficiently short to (just barely) sustain research and advising connections at Hopkins
 - On the boundary of a duration that will allow recruiting the next AD for R&M

Coda

- My IPA has been and I trust the third year will continue to be a rewarding and fulfilling experience
- Three years is just right as is 80% & 20% (total is 140%):
 - Sufficiently long and intense to learn the culture and have some impact
 - Sufficiently short to (just barely) sustain research and advising connections at Hopkins
 - On the boundary of a duration that will allow recruiting the next AD for R&M
- More generally, increasing cross-fertilization in all directions and in a variety of contexts will be extremely beneficial to individuals, FSAs and the nation

Coda

- My IPA has been and I trust the third year will continue to be a rewarding and fulfilling experience
- Three years is just right as is 80% & 20% (total is 140%):
 - Sufficiently long and intense to learn the culture and have some impact
 - Sufficiently short to (just barely) sustain research and advising connections at Hopkins
 - On the boundary of a duration that will allow recruiting the next AD for R&M
- More generally, increasing cross-fertilization in all directions and in a variety of contexts will be extremely beneficial to individuals, FSAs and the nation

Thank you