

May 12, 2008

## **The AASRO Committee on Education and Advocacy**

### **1. Introduction**

This paper:

- a) Forwards a draft charge for the committee;
- b) Reviews key arguments relevant to advocacy and image of survey research centers; and
- c) Suggests a few action steps for AASRO consideration

### **2. Charge to the Committee**

Information about people, organizations, and places is increasingly important for public policy and for social, behavioral, environmental, and biomedical research. To be most useful, this information must be representative of defined populations, scientifically rigorous, and of high quality. For over sixty years, university based survey research centers have been leaders in developing new methods for obtaining such information, in training students and researchers to collect it, and in providing researchers with this information using the best available technologies. This work has typically been done without fanfare or much notice, but because of its importance, we believe that the time has come to make the case for university based survey research. Our goals are to:

- a) Increase the stature of survey research centers by demonstrating that they are an essential part of research and teaching universities through their contributions to the social, behavioral, environmental, and biomedical sciences and to education, law, medicine, public health, public policy, and social welfare.
- b) Further the development and understanding of survey methodology as an important scientific method.
- c) Show that university based survey research centers are at the forefront of developing new ways (e.g., the web) to collect new forms (e.g., administrative) of data.
- d) Show that these centers are especially important for promulgating and disseminating new methods in a transparent way that facilitates their use.
- e) Promote and recognize the important service that these centers provide to state and local government and to non-profit organizations.
- f) Bolster the education of the current generation of academic users of surveys and of the next generation of survey researchers.

### **3. Common Arguments for the Value of an Academic Survey Organization**

Because academic survey centers do not have a primary educational mission, they can be periodically misunderstood. The value of such a center on an academic campus includes the following:

- by their very existence, they identify that the university is supportive of original research, that it offers its faculty the infrastructure for advanced research
  - major research universities have such data collection centers
  - key national funding agencies (e.g., NSF, NIH) depend on such centers for the measurement step of the scientific endeavors they support
- if the center is integrated into the educational curriculum, then undergraduates and graduate students can learn research methods of use in their later careers
  - hiring students as research assistants in the survey center
  - course examples (survey practica, questionnaire design classes, statistics classes on complex data analysis)
  - program examples (graduate certificates in survey methodology, MS degrees in survey methodology)
- by offering infrastructure for scientific data collection, the center can provide efficient support for proposals
  - their experience can teach faculty about what rigorous scientific surveys entail
  - their experience can offer proposal sections for rigorous survey methods that aid in the peer review process; they assist faculty in writing proposals
- by integration with the science of survey methodology survey centers can be core intelligence for innovation in measurement techniques
  - no single discipline studies measurement techniques, instead focusing on the key scientific questions (similarly, the core of astronomers do not contribute to design of new telescopes, but advances in astronomy depend on them); the survey methodologists at survey centers keep up with these developments as a byproduct of their professional commitment
- by their permanent nature (in contrast to the intermittent data collections of individual faculty members), they are current with the increasing complex research regulatory environment in the US; this adds value to the campuses and increases institutional compliance likelihood
  - because of frequent interaction with the IRB they know the current issues for human subjects review
  - because of ongoing research financial operations, they are aware of auditing rules for use of research funds
- because survey centers inherently provide data collection tools applicable to many disciplines, with the appropriate appointments and collaborative support mechanisms, the centers can be catalysts for interdisciplinary research

- by their permanence, they offer the university an immediate vehicle to help themselves, local and state agencies solve applied research problems
  - by assisting institutional research units, they provide expertise in surveys without an additional infrastructure cost
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#### **4. Action Steps to Enhance the On-Campus Prestige of an Academic Survey Research Center**

Academic survey centers are often unacknowledged and unappreciated on their own campuses. Lack of knowledge about survey methodology and about the kind of ongoing staffing and infrastructure required to conduct high quality survey work, as well as lack of visibility and awareness of the activities and contributions on campus, contribute to a set of common misconceptions. Recurring complaints are that survey centers do not contribute to the educational mission of the campus; they are not integrated into the campus; not many of the faculty use the survey center; the center charges too much for their services; they are too well subsidized, and they operate differently from other research centers on campus. Further misconceptions stem from lack of understanding of survey methodology as a scientific method and the perception of survey researchers as technicians rather than academic scientists.

Potential Action Options:

- *Organized External Reviews Coordinated with AASRO.* Centers undergoing external review can use experienced AASRO members on their reviewing team. AASRO can develop a repository of information, a stable of reviewers, and templates for self-studies and for external reviewers that address common concerns about their role and structure of survey centers raised by university communities. It is often helpful for a center to request an outside review. The involvement of AASRO can increase confidence that the review will be well informed.
- *AASRO-generated List of Performance Indicators.* AASRO can assemble a set of recommended indicators of activity and research performance that centers collect on a routine basis. Some examples are: number of proposals, number of new projects funded, percentage of proposals awarded, number of consultations, number of graduate students used, papers presented at meetings, papers published, and number of theses using data collected by the center. Templates for presentation of these indicators can also be shared. While many of these indicators are ones that would be applied to other types of research centers, some are more specific to survey research centers or should be given more weight when considering the performance of a survey center. AASRO can develop a statement that makes this case that can be used by members in their respective universities. AASRO can develop a repository of information about its member organizations that centers can use as models or for comparison when interacting with their own

university administrations.

- *AASRO-generated Set of Financial Indicators for Academic Survey Research Centers.* Similarly, AASRO can assemble and provide models for a set of indicators of financial performance and activity that centers can collect. (e.g., mix of hard and soft money support for staff, overrun status of projects and reasons for overruns, number of interviewer hours by mode, number of completed surveys by mode, financial volume, direct costs, indirect costs, costs of non-project supported activities and staff development). AASRO can compile information on the variety of funding structures for survey centers in the organization and the relationship of funding model to performance to help members make the case for what is viable to maintain successful operations.
- *Cost-Quality Tradeoffs for Survey Data Collection.* AASRO can prepare information about the value of standard academic data collection activities that contribute to higher costs, but are important for data quality (e.g., interviewer training, monitoring) to help survey centers make the case for their costs. Materials can also be developed that would help educate university administrators about the kind of deep and ongoing infrastructure necessary as the foundation for performing high quality survey research—and the costs associated with maintaining that infrastructure.
- *Sharing of Efficient Ways to Comply with Financial Regulations.* AASRO can develop a mechanism for sharing information about models for charging clients that maximize effectiveness and financial return and also for demonstrating to their respective universities how these approaches are in compliance with regulations about use of funds. This mechanism can also serve the purpose of providing timely information about financial compliance regulations and how to deal with the in the survey context since university administrators are often unaware of the potential flexibility in the regulations.
- *Sharing of Models for Educational Integration between a Survey Research Center and the Larger Campus.* Several academic centers have developed short courses in the fundamentals of sampling, questionnaire design, and mode effects; some centers have full academic courses in one or more departments; some centers contribute to certificate programs and graduate degree programs in survey methodology. Centers could share teaching materials to permit wider impact on several campuses. Lectures could be given by visiting AASRO members, to communicate that the local center is part of a larger academic network.

## **5. Action Steps to Enhance the National Prestige of Academic Survey Research Centers**

Making the case for survey research centers is a long-term project which will require multiple approaches. We recommend the following:

- Developing a short statement about “contributions of University based survey research centers”.

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- With the official creation of AASRO, working to get an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about its creation and its goals.
- Trying to get support, perhaps from the National Science Foundation, for a study (based upon the surveys discussed at the Berkeley meeting) of the current status of survey research centers. Even a modest study could go a long way toward defining University based survey research centers and demonstrating their importance.
- Working towards getting academic social science organizations (especially economics, political science, and sociology) to cooperate in thinking about the status of “Survey Research Centers: Laboratories for Social Science Research”.
- Working towards getting the National Academy of Sciences to do a report on “University Based Survey Research Centers—Current Status and Future Prospects”.

To this end, Henry Brady, has promised that he will work with the American Political Science Association (as its incoming president) to achieve these ends. Groves will nurture ties with the Committee on National Statistics of the National Research Council to propose a national panel review of academic survey research centers.