

**Atkinson Center for Sustainable Future Topical Lunch**  
**November 7, 2012**

**“The Academic Sustainability Community: How Can it Impact Policy?”**



**Presented by:** John Sipple, Rod Howe, David Kay, and Robin Blakely-Armitage

**Attendees:** Shorna Allred, Lauren Chambliss, Diane Csillag, Dave Dieterich, Joe Francis, Drew Harvell, Sally Klingel, Jonathan Ochsorn, Susan Riha, Helene Schember, Jennifer Tiffany, Jan Vink, Wendy Wolford

**What issue does the project address?**

Our Applied Research and Extension project, officially entitled “Informing County-Based Economic Development (ED) Decisions: A Scientific Foundation for Strategic Outreach”, is designed to develop an improved educational infrastructure, supported by applied research, for Extension and Outreach programming for local government officials. Local officials allocate resources and make key decisions regarding complex, challenging issues. These decisions directly affect the public in virtually all areas of the economy, environment, society, and beyond. The central issue in this project is improving local government oriented Extension and outreach practice by developing a fuller understanding of the role of research based information and other university resources in the decision-making processes of local officials. We seek research based answers to questions such as: In what contexts do officials become aware of or actively turn to faculty and Extension/Land Grant University research-based resources, whether directly, through various media technologies, or through other intermediaries? How do local officials use readily available research and data? Do they use it at all? How do the tensions and conflicts that often exist between data, research, politics, experience, ideology, and opinion play in the decision-making process of local government officials? The project builds on CaRDI’s core practice of building the capacity for informed dialogue and decision making by local government leaders, CCE Educators, and other stakeholder groups.

**What is our approach?**

Scant theoretical and empirical research has been explicitly focused on local decision makers in their official decision making roles. Research honing in on the role of information and learning in the decision making processes of local officials is underdeveloped. Published research attention to land grant outreach programming targeted at local officials is equally limited. Our proposed project will explore these and related bodies of literature to more systematically

synthesize implications for local government outreach programming. With guidance from our faculty collaborators in communication, we will include a review of the implications of changing technologies of learning, including social networking. In pragmatic recognition of a modestly scaled proposal, we will emphasize cost-effective strategies for our research such as focus groups and online questionnaires, and we will constrain our research to New York State with the primary goal of building knowledge and capacity within our own system (CaRDI, CCE, and Cornell University). However, through our connections to national collaborators, we anticipate creating a basis for future work that will have national scope and implications.

Based on our literature review to date and our extensive practice-based experience in educating activities involving local officials, key questions that will be at the center of our **research efforts** are:

- How is university-based information and research viewed, accessed, interpreted and used by decision-makers dealing with economic development and fiscal decisions? When and how do University-based data, research, and training influence local decision-makers and their policy decisions?
- Are rational, evidence based decision making models helpful in informing outreach and Extension efforts intended to strengthen the informed decision making capacity of local officials dealing with significant economic development and fiscal decisions? When might competing or supplemental models be helpful?
- To what extent are local officials able and willing to attend to and assimilate research based information when it reinforces, and when it contradicts, the conclusions that would be most congruent with strong political pressures or pre-existing ideology about economic development and fiscal policy ?
- What key research questions which, if addressed, would better support Extension and outreach efforts focused on local officials, remain unanswered or even unposed?

Key questions that will motivate our **Extension and outreach efforts** are:

- How can CaRDI/CCE/Cornell enhance their own practice to support informed decision-making effectively in County government contexts? What mix of approaches and tools are most effective in which kinds of contexts and with which kinds of issues?
- How can Outreach programs, particularly those pursued in the issue areas of greatest interest to CaRDI and those pertaining to Cornell's research and extension priorities, be improved to reflect research supported best practice in local government outreach and training?

The project will focus on elected officials in a small set of NYS counties who are making economic development or fiscally significant decisions requiring a legislative vote: e.g., for service sharing, property tax cap override, and land use/energy issues. We will conduct structured interviews & focus groups with officials (possessing varying lengths of tenure in their positions), implement online questionnaires, and analyze televised committee/public meetings as

well as other media coverage. These activities will identify factors influencing individual decision making, group (committee/legislative) decision dynamics, the role of information & educational interventions (university outreach efforts), and the nature of relationships on process and decision outcomes.

### **What is the intended impact?**

The Extension components of the project will constitute our core effort. This project will advance research to improve CaRDI's, CCE's, and, more generally, the University's effectiveness in engaging stakeholder groups via the communication of appropriate data and analyses to enhance local decision-making capacity. This project will result in better informed and improved decision-making at the local level. In a time of increased fiscal constraint and heightened political tensions demanding greater accountability and efficiency, localities must work more efficiently, collaboratively, and be well-informed about key issues. In turn, land grant institutions need to ensure that the research and data they produce is relevant, accessible, and supported. Learning how to better deliver sound research-based information and training, and promoting engagement with our stakeholders on these critical community and economic development issues will build capacity at the local and regional level. This project takes an innovative and leading role as a foundation for land grant universities to explore critical questions surrounding the communication of research and information to policymakers.

### **Questions, comments, and issues raised in the discussion:**

How to separate local decisions from more macro-level forces?

How to broaden the issue/conversation in order to create opportunity for more/new information to be factored in?

Risk perception and attenuation?

Peer communication – issues cross administrative boundaries – need cooperation at regional level, therefore look at local AND broader context.

Examine social contact, not just individual behavior because actions are not always “rational”.

With our 3 case studies, social context will vary.

It seems that there are two projects: 1) how does one communicate information? and 2) how are decisions made?

What is the impact of past decisions?

How do you frame decision-making? (ask focus group participants)

Adoption, Implementation, and dissemination field

What are the social network structures that support decisions?

Why are policymakers seeking information? To support an already held position, or to bring in new perspectives?

As an example, look at new perspectives on economic development.

How does one judge the credibility of information? Trust issues

Credibility versus impact

Do leaders want to educate their public, or sway the public's opinion?

Conflict of short versus long-term goals may influence what information is sought, used, etc.

Probabilistic – uncertainty on many issues

Facts versus interpretation of facts

Data as a proxy to support goals

Examine “bargaining” literature