Why the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center is Celebrating 50 years of Serving WSU

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Why was the SESRC created?

• When historians reflect on why new university research centers are created, they often talk about the need for a theoretical idea to be tested through new research.

• They may also talk about how graduate students are emphatically trained to emphasize theory first and only then do the research that influences our scientific understanding of the problem that caused the research center to be formed.

• That was not how the SESRC got started.

• But, the outcome of its existence has had a huge scientific impact.

• It also has resulted in direct service to Washington State and others, consistent with our land-grant mission.

• My purpose today is to explain how the SESRC was formed and why.
2020 has been a difficult year

• 2020 has certainly been a difficult year for the nation and for WSU; we are experiencing a “perfect storm” of seemingly intractable problems—racial injustice, climate change, wild fires, hurricanes, job and health care losses, the disappearance of small businesses and extreme divergence in political perspectives on the nature of these problems.

• In addition masks, social distancing, and the switch to online college instruction coupled with demands of home instruction for children are creating tension.

• Yet, when someone asks me what was my most intense year as a WSU faculty member, my quick answer is 1970 when the Public Opinion Laboratory (POL) of the new Social Research Center was created in response to student concerns.
The tension in 1970

- The Viet Nam War was creating enormous frustration and division among people.
- When the U.S. invaded Cambodia, students marched on French Administration insisting that the president do “something”.
- There were practical limits on what the WSU president could do and the focus of the conflict shifted to a list of Black Student Demands that had been developing for the previous two years.
- Students and many faculty went on strike during the spring semester, 1970, and classes ended.
- As tensions built, new faculty like myself were asked to spend a few night hours in our office buildings “to protect” them.
- To resolve the conflict President Terrell agreed to the cancellation of two days of classes in the 1970-71 school year to hold Racism Workshops for members of the WSU community.
- The general public and many local residents were upset at what students and faculty were doing; rumors flew widely about long term financial consequences for the University, students, and sympathetic faculty.
- As a newly arrived assistant professor, I was worried.
April 1970; You want me to do what?

• Melvin Defleur, chair of sociology, went to the President: “If we had some money we could create a telephone survey laboratory to do quick surveys to learn what students and others are thinking.”

• The money was provided and I was asked to form the Public Opinion Laboratory, install phones, hire interviewers, and provide results.

• I was stunned—people did not do telephone surveys in those days, there was no scientific literature, only in-person interviews were considered legitimate for science.

• But, those two Racism workshops, and people’s attitudes needed to be understood, and I had done a single telephone survey just before coming to WSU in September, 1969. I was assigned the task.
The newness of telephone did not mean there was an absence of survey science that could be applied to conducting surveys. 

Sample surveys allow us to estimate with knowable precision the distribution of a characteristic in a population by randomly surveying only a small portion of the members of that population.

• That capability allows us to answer questions like, “What percent of WSU students (or the general public) thought the racism workshops were a good idea. Well done interviews with about 400 WSU students, or a slightly larger sample of Washington residents would provide estimates (+/- 5%).

• The incredible capability of telephone (and also mail which we also decided to do) is that we could do surveys quickly, at low cost.

• After we started doing surveys, others at WSU saw how this “survey idea” could help them solve some of their research problems. In the next five years we facilitated 31 telephone surveys, with a mean response rate of 91% and 50 mail surveys with 74% response rates.

• Here in five slides is a summary of the last five decades.
The 1970’s
People & Methods

• 1968 – Social Research Center (SRC) established with Dr. Jim Short as Director

• 1970 – SRC Public Opinion Laboratory POL (call center) established with Dr. Don Dillman as Coordinator.

• POL was probably first university telephone survey laboratory in the U.S.

• **82** projects were funded during this decade

• Bernard Babbitt – first to initiate computer data processing for state agencies.

• 1978 TDM book reporting POL research provided first practical guide for doing mail and telephone surveys.

• **$2.6 million** received for SRC projects.
The 1980’s

People & Methods

• 1980 Rita Koontz began 38 years of leadership as Administrative Manager.

• 1981-2 Assistant Director, Dr. John Tarnai, and Zoltan Porga created one of first Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing Systems for personal computers in the U.S.

• 1986 SRC renamed as Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC)

• 1986. Dr. Don Dillman became Director

• 1986 ff. Began state agency surveys including Family Income Study ($5 mil over 5 years).

• Developed year-round staff plus ~100 student interviewers and keypunch operators.

• Rapid expansion of services, e.g. data processing for UI National Parks Studies, and long term building of staff.

• Thom Allen and Rose Krebill-Prather started their SESRC careers as telephone interviewers.

• 191 funded projects worth $4.8 million.
The 1990’s
People & Methods

Kent Miller, Danna Moore, Dan Vakoch joined staff and made career contributions to the SESRC.

- 1991. Don Dillman loaned to Census Bureau under Intergovernmental Personal Government Act (IPA) as their Senior Survey Methodologist in Director’s Office to create a respondent-friendly Census.
- 1991—John Tarnai became Acting Director, moving to Director in 1996.
- 1994—”How to Conduct Your Own Survey” book with Priscilla Salant was targeted to practical users, from artists to engineers.
- 1995 – First CATI software retired, and SESRC’s Public Opinion Lab moved to the WSU Research Park with new computers.
- 1998 –Puget Sound branch of the SESRC was formed.
- SESRC employed 25 full time staff) and 300 student/hourly staff.
- SESRC developed in-house web software and conducted first web surveys.
- 549 survey projects worth $15.3 million.
- A completely revised 2nd edition of TDM book was published; the first methods book to publish rudimentary web survey methods and guidelines.
The 2000’s
People and Methods
Candiya Mann, Yi-Jen Wang and Nick Ponomarev joined SESRC staff, providing leadership for new SESRC initiatives.

Sociology PhD graduate students, Leah Christian, Jolene Smyth, Taj Mahon-Half, Arina Gertseva, Benjamin Messer, Morgan Millar and Michele Edwards contributed heavily to this research.

• 2000-2007 A series of SESRC experiments, financed by NSF, USDA and Gallup, showed how measurement differences between survey modes (e.g. telephone, web and mail) can be reduced through application of visual design principles.

• 2007-2014. A second series of SESRC experiments, similarly financed, showed how to “push” respondents to the web with mail follow-up, as a replacement for the declining use of telephone surveys.


• 628 funded projects, worth $21.9 million.

• Ongoing employment of over 100 WSU students each year, and mentoring of communication and professional skills.
The 2010’s

People & Methods

New faces and capabilities: Darren Bystrom, Tim Haight, Nathan Palmer, Lauren Scott, James McCall, David Vollmer, Ian Kessack, Breckenridge Morgan, Katrina Shelton, Collette Pipkins and Cindi Jette.

• 2014 Dr. Lena Le, former director of the UI Parks Studies Unit, becomes 4th Director of the SESRC and expanded clientele in new directions.

• 2014. 4th edition of TDM book based in large part upon SESRC visual design and web-push research in 2000’s is published.

• 2016 Survey Design Clinic established to provide ongoing consultation to WSU faculty, students and staff.

• WSU research team received AAPOR’s 2017 Warren J. Mitofsky Innovator Award for development of web-push data collection methods by SESRC.

• New research began on how to adapt services to:
  • helping clients utilize do-it-yourself web software.
  • Smartphones becoming “device-of-choice” for responding to web surveys, requiring new measurement techniques.

• **589** funded projects worth **$25.7 million**.

• Expanded printing and mailing pieces to over 300,000/year.

• Expanded data security measures through OR IT support and initiated HIPAA Compliance Process.
$70 million dollars in projects

Grants and Contracts at the SESRC by decade
(2021 Funded Projects at $70M)

1970s: $2,644,153.00
1980s: $4,854,603.00
1990s: $15,307,999.00
2000s: $21,854,693.00
2010s: $27,446,281.68

Dillman, Allen and Krebill-Prather, September 2020
50 year trend in yearly dollar value of funded projects

Grants and Contracts at the SESRC by starting year
(2021 Funded Projects at $70M)
Putting the last 50 years in perspective

• Since 1991 (for which we have detailed records), the SESRC has surveyed well over a million people in these ways:
  • 90 mail surveys
  • 600 telephone surveys
  • 340 web surveys
  • 265 mixed-mode surveys

• There has been enormous change in the mix, and how we implement each type of survey.

• The tension underlying these changes has been considerable but necessary, and doing that has required constant innovation.
Back to Theory and Research

• The SESRC has conducted more than 2,000 projects, for WSU departments and outside clients.

• These clients provided support for 20-25 specialized staff members and other support for conducting hundreds of science-based experiments, while also collecting substantive survey data to meet their needs.

• The Center was born out of practical need, rather than interest in testing a specific theoretical idea, yet the connection between sample survey theory and research was critical to our success.

• The pressure of serving client needs, required constant innovation, the results of which is now influencing survey design throughout the world.
Positioning the SESRC for the future

• The SESRC remains one of the few client supported survey centers in Western United States, and does frequent surveys for other universities, public agencies, and private sector organizations as well as WSU faculty and administrative units.

• Telephone survey methods that we innovated (voice telephone interviews) in the 1970’s are now declining in use, being replaced by mixed-mode methods.

• The 2020’s will see a continued need to innovate new methods and support for how surveys can serve University research and graduate education, as well as the state and nation.

• Among them is the need to support the proliferation of people at WSU wanting to do their own surveys using Qualtrics and other software, but who need help in measurement, question construction and sample design for results to be valid.
The 2019 SESRC Team at planning retreat for next 50 years
THANK YOU

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