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Value of Social Science Research Often Measured by What You Don't See

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Value of Social Science Research Often Measured by What You Don't See

By Roberto Hugh Potter
UCF Forum columnist
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In early April, our UCF colleagues at the Florida Space Institute secured a \$55 million grant to produce an instrument for space research. Congratulations!

Shortly after, the bombs exploded at the Boston Marathon, and around the same time I had a conversation with the leader of an important crime-fighting program in Central Florida. That person lamented the difficulty in attracting funding for a program that does not serve what I term the “cute and cuddly.”

The cost of our justice system is tremendous, but the funding for research into effective crime-fighting programs and hardware is minimal.

The budget for the Florida Department of Corrections is about \$2 billion. In 2007, the U.S. Census Bureau put the cost of the total justice system (police, judicial and corrections sectors) at \$697 per person in Florida. The national average was \$633.

In 2011, the National Institute of Justice, the research branch of the U.S. Department of Justice, awarded 387 grants totaling about \$207 million. In 2012, the NIJ reduced its grants to 363, totaling about \$168 million.

By the way, UCF has been very successful in obtaining direct NIJ grants in the area of criminal-justice technology, receiving \$711,000 in 2011, and \$2.3 million in 2012. Among those 2012 grants, Dr. Jacinta Gau and I received \$250,000, which is considered a “large” social science grant for the NIJ, to study the impact of Florida’s “pill mill” legislation.

NASA’s \$10 million to be awarded to Engineering over each of the next five years would equate to a considerable chunk of the total amount of grant funding from the DOJ for research. Of all the dollars coming to UCF, only a small portion goes to the social science

of studying crime and crime reduction. To be sure, other funded research in the areas of substance abuse and mental health touch on crime. I suspect those are also small in comparison to what Engineering, computing and other physical sciences attract in a given year.

This catalog of funding amounts ties back to the lament of the local law enforcement leader in that many of us in the social and helping sciences must rely on partnerships with local government agencies and community- and faith-based organizations to seek funding to conduct our research and pay our graduate students. Our partners, in turn, are looking for ways to increase the amount of grant funds they can spend on programs or personnel to deliver what they need to ameliorate or eliminate the problems they are addressing. That means there is often little money left over for the partnership with academic-based evaluators and researchers.

We tend to work in a fundamentally nonprofit world as we research the impact of crime prevention and intervention programs, substance-abuse prevention, mental-health treatment, child- and family-welfare interventions, and so forth. It is doubtful that social science researchers will ever see the types of commercial applications and profits of the innovations from space research or simulation technology.

But that does not mean we do not have value. Regrettably, perhaps, often the value we social science researchers add to our community is most evident in its invisibility.

As in Boston, when the types of research we do with law enforcement combating violence fail, they fail in plain sight. When our crime-reduction research partnerships lead to lower jail and prison populations, the exceptional failure dooms our success to oblivion.

We tend to deal with the dark side of our nature; the sorts of behaviors people don't like to discuss, but which lead the local news. Success is generally noted in the absence of behaviors, rarely in the positive behaviors of those with whom we intervene. But, this is not necessarily how it has to be.

Some of my acquaintances at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as public servants at the Washington State Institute of Public Policy, have developed ways of figuring out the value of prevention and intervention in these areas. The CDC folks term their approach "Prevention Effectiveness," the "systematic assessment of the

impact of public...policies, programs, and practices” on programs addressing health and other public-interest areas.

The successes of the research partnerships we develop are measured in victims averted, second children not born to unwed teens, families that maintain housing for more than a few weeks, and so forth. The value of those activities can be monetized for policy analysis, but that is not truly the value to the community. The value to the community is the creation with our community partners of the conditions that make my home state a great place to live, develop business opportunities, and generally enjoy life.

When my partner in public safety says it is difficult to attract supporters to a cause that addresses the side of life no convention/visitor’s bureau or chamber of commerce wants to acknowledge – it is true. Regrettably, we have similar issues: Doing what we do for little profit and with little visibility – beyond educating the next generation of social researchers. Sometimes it is barely even noticed on campus or in the Legislature.

Perhaps we need to do a better job of “selling” the benefits we provide. We could better highlight the cost reductions of behaviors and situations that effective university social/behavioral research and community partnerships address, things such as crime victimization, substance abuse, and child and partner abuse. Those are the kinds of behaviors that are usually mentioned only when a failure occurs.

Sometimes what you don’t see is the result of a great deal of work by people and organizations who work for relatively little and in the shadows cast by the dark side of our social world.

Those benefits may not be on the nightly news, but they are a key part of developing a great community.

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