

The Metropolitan Studies Institute at USC Upstate: Translational Research that Drives Community Decision-Making

Kathleen Brady

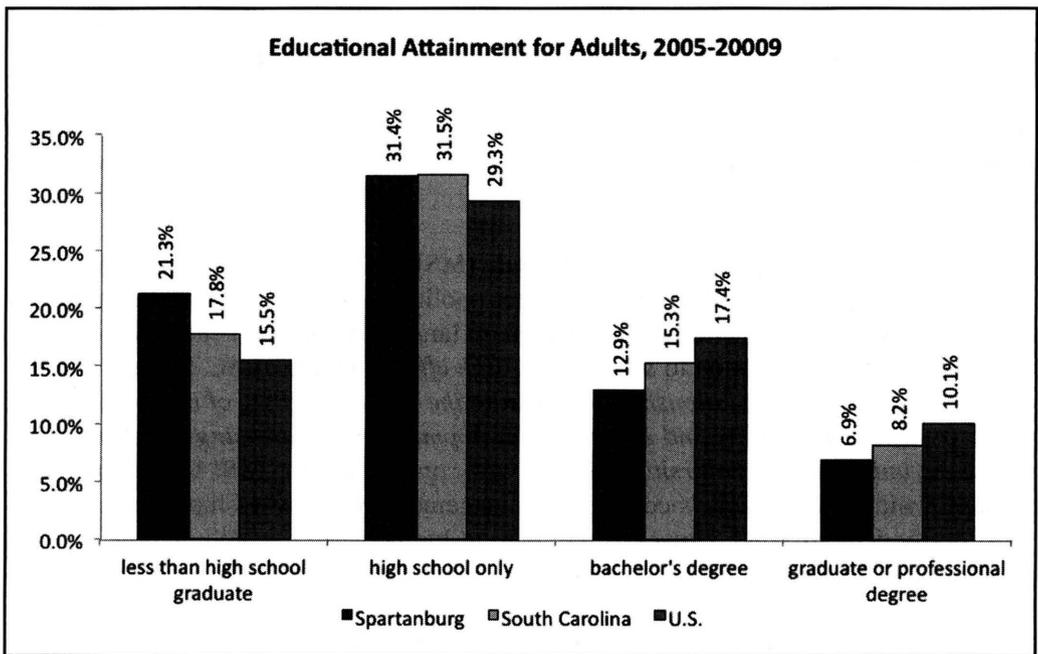
Abstract

The Metropolitan Studies Institute (MSI) at the University of South Carolina Upstate (USC Upstate) demonstrates a robust and unique record of community impact through community indicators research and other translational research. The MSI's work drives programmatic priorities and funding decisions, generates revenue, and increases the community's capacity to improve quality of life for its residents. Examples of research are presented. Outcomes of these studies illustrate the impact of translational research in a community characterized by low educational attainment and low income.

The story of the Metropolitan Studies Institute (MSI) at USC Upstate is the story of a strong and unique relationship between a metropolitan university and its community—a community where decisions are predicated, in large part, on data generated by the university. Given its mission to *support research efforts between USC Upstate and the community, enhancing relationships, promoting the reciprocal flow of information and ideas, assisting community and economic development, and increasing the strategic use of the university's scholarship and outreach capabilities*, the MSI is the portal through which USC Upstate's community engagement and stewardship of place is most deftly demonstrated. However, the relationship between the MSI and the community extends significantly beyond traditional community engagement.

Situated in the “upstate” of South Carolina on the I-85 corridor half way between Charlotte, North Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia, USC Upstate thrives in the forward-looking community of Spartanburg. A county of 227,000 residents, Spartanburg is the headquarters of a number of major corporations, such as BMW, Milliken and Company, Denny's, QS1 Data Systems, and Extended Stay Hotels. Spartanburg is also a college town with six other institutions of higher learning in addition to USC Upstate, including a regional community college, a selective four-year liberal arts university, a private women's college, a two-year residential college, and a College of Osteopathic Medicine in its first year of operation. Philanthropy, volunteerism, and other charitable activities are thriving in Spartanburg. In fact, the current volunteer rate of the Spartanburg Metropolitan Statistical Area is 35.7 percent, markedly higher than the national rate of 26.5 percent (Corporation for National and Community Service 2011).

Despite its many assets, Spartanburg struggles to overcome a wide spectrum of ongoing social and economic challenges. The county has a long history as a textile manufacturing center. However, over the past two decades textile manufacturing has largely been outsourced to the international sector. Although many other “textile towns” of comparable size have recovered and are thriving economically, Spartanburg continues to experience high poverty and unemployment. Ironically, given Spartanburg’s seven colleges and universities, its high poverty and unemployment have their genesis in the county’s low educational attainment rate. Whereas approximately 40 percent of U.S. adults (age twenty-five and older) have attained the bachelor’s level or higher, less than 20 percent of Spartanburg adults have done so. In fact, 21 percent of Spartanburg’s adults have not graduated from high school. Mean educational attainment for Spartanburg County is lower than the state average (U.S. Census 2011).



Source: U.S. Census

The Spartanburg Community Indicators Project

Over the last twenty years, a local awareness of the power of data to impact the community has been developing in Spartanburg. In the late 1980s, volunteers serving the local United Way and the local county foundation began collecting community data, hoping to find empirical evidence of the nature and extent of human service needs in the county. The idea was to base funding decisions on data so that limited dollars would have the greatest impact. The first collections of these data were called “critical indicators,” and nonprofit funders began using them to drive their funding decisions. This process engendered support by both funded agencies and donors. By 2003, the Spartanburg Community Indicators Project, as it is known now, was

officially born, and the responsibility for data collection shifted from volunteers to paid out-of-state consultants. As the project grew, it reflected the community's growing perception that decisions based on empirical evidence have the greatest impact. The purpose of the Community Indicators Project is to gather, analyze, and report local data that reflect key issues pertaining to quality of life in six broad indicator areas. It is seen as a community-wide initiative, with various stakeholders involved in the process and in the data usage.

Shortly after the MSI was formed in 2005, it became clear to the Community Indicators Project partners that the MSI needed to be in the leadership of the Community Indicators Project to provide the academic expertise to collect and analyze community data locally. Thus, USC Upstate became one of four partners in the Community Indicators Project, along with the Spartanburg County Foundation, United Way of the Piedmont, and the Spartanburg County government. Whereas the other partners provide monetary contributions to the project, USC Upstate provides the in-kind services of the MSI.

Currently, about one-half of MSI's work is devoted to collecting, analyzing, and reporting data relative to the community's six indicator areas—education, public health, the natural environment, the economy, the social environment, and community engagement. Each year three indicator areas are updated and the extended data reports are uploaded to the website. In addition, printed “data dashboards” are made widely available as quick reference companion pieces for each indicator area. Upon the release of a data report and its accompanying dashboard, several community forums are held, and the lead MSI researcher presents the findings. Panels of local subject matter experts, usually directors of organizations that address the particular indicator area, also are involved in the community forums to answer questions from the audience and to report on current initiatives of their organizations.

Until this past year when the MSI shepherded indicators projects in two smaller neighboring counties, Spartanburg County was the only South Carolina county to have an indicators project. Beaufort County, in the “low country” of the state, now has a fledgling indicators project, and the MSI has offered its assistance. However, it is typically only larger cities that invest themselves in meaningful community indicators projects.

Commitment to Translational Research

The MSI's work with the Spartanburg Community Indicators Project clearly demonstrates USC Upstate's engagement and stewardship of place in the community. It also demonstrates the translational nature of the MSI's work. Translational research means different things to different people. It is often used to describe applied biomedical research, but more generally it is applied research that accelerates data into knowledge through collaboration, data sharing, and data integration. Translational research is a catalyst of practical solutions. All of the MSI's work, community indicators research and otherwise, is reciprocal and practical—that is, engaged and translational. Some examples are illustrative.

The Status of Public Health in

Spartanburg County and AccessHealth Spartanburg

Spartanburg County's low educational status results in low median income, high uninsured rates, and poor health outcomes. The Community Indicators Project report on the public health of Spartanburg County two years ago was the catalyst for the formation of a group of healthcare providers that call themselves "The Road to Better Health." The data showed that there were approximately 29,000 residents of the county ages nineteen to sixty-four who live at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level and also live without health insurance (equating to about 18 percent of this age group). Emergency department data showed that local free clinics and federally supported healthcare centers were not meeting the needs of the medically underserved. Using the data collected and analyzed by the MSI, The Road to Better Health obtained a large grant from the Duke Endowment, as well as significant local support, to improve access and quality of care for these low-income, uninsured residents throughout the county through a new and unique nonprofit called AccessHealth Spartanburg. AccessHealth provides case management and care navigation to this particular demographic. It has been a year since AccessHealth opened its doors, and it is currently coordinating care for over one thousand patients. The MSI continues to monitor the data, assessing the impact of AccessHealth services by measuring decreases in emergency department visits and their related costs, as well as other related data. It is likely that the data will support the need for sustained funding.

Spartanburg County Community Food

Assessment and Hub City Farmers Market

In 2009, the local farmers market contracted with the MSI for a Community Food Assessment. This was a "food desert study" of five different municipalities in the county, including the city of Spartanburg. The local farmers market wanted to measure access to healthy food for residents of these areas. In four of the five areas studied, prevalence of grocery stores and fresh food outlets was very low relative to fast food outlets and convenience stores. These areas were very clearly "food deserts." Not surprisingly, extremely high rates of obesity and chronic health conditions were evident in these areas. These findings resulted in the award of a Robert Wood Johnson grant to the farmers market and the local active living nonprofit to bring a mobile farmers market to these areas and to attach a bicycle trailer to the mobile market. Residents of these food desert areas can now purchase low-cost fruits and vegetables that are brought into their neighborhoods (even using public food benefits to do so), and they can also borrow bicycles for recreation and transportation.

An Analysis of the Nonprofit

Infrastructure in Spartanburg County

In 2010, the Spartanburg County Foundation contracted with the MSI for a quantitative and qualitative study of the nonprofit infrastructure of Spartanburg County. Quantitative data relative to agency budgets and expenditures were analyzed, and qualitative data, derived from interviews with nonprofit leaders, provided insight

on board practices and back office issues. Results showed extensive service fragmentation in several areas, under-met needs especially relative to the homeless population, and a lack of resources to sustain new and proven programs. Qualitative findings pointed to a lack of board training and to the potential for cooperatives that could maximize resources spent on administrative functions and supplies. This research resulted in a clear and timely picture of Spartanburg's nonprofit capacity to achieve desired social outcomes. The data are now being used to support a major grant application for nonprofit capacity building, including establishing a nonprofit resource center. The study also is facilitating a comparison with national best-practice models and informing strategic planning for local funders.

Education Gap Analysis

Because low population educational attainment is the primary factor holding back Spartanburg County's economic success (Stockwell 2008), the MSI has been called upon to do a number of studies related to this issue. An MSI study commissioned by the state Department of Education investigated the interaction between preparation at the high school level and local workforce issues. Specifically examined were the projected workforce needs and occupational projections over the next fifteen years and how they match student preparation and career interests. A disconnect was found between needs of employers and skill acquisition and interests of students, which was even more pronounced in Spartanburg than in other comparable areas. Based on the data resulting from the study, the Upstate Regional Education Center now coordinates creative interventions in middle schools and high schools county-wide to increase graduation rates; promote post-high school training; and increase interest in science, technology, engineering, and math.

Obesity Prediction

Like many other communities, Spartanburg is experiencing an obesity epidemic. The local Childhood Obesity Task Force asked the MSI to analyze the weight status of the county's elementary and middle school students, and the findings were predictably frightening. As a result, the task force has obtained an ACHIEVE grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to change community policies that impact the weight of Spartanburg's citizens. The MSI is involved in the evaluation piece of the grant.

In furtherance of this research, the MSI has involved mathematics and sociology faculty in designing a model to predict obesity at the census tract, or neighborhood level. This, like much other MSI research, is a good example the collaborative nature of translational research. The objective is to determine which variables, fixed and unfixed, are most predictive of obesity in Spartanburg County so that findings can be used to target interventions and prevention strategies by neighborhood areas.

Economic and Evaluation Analyses

The MSI also routinely conducts a wide variety of other translational research projects in response to community need. A variety of program evaluations, return on investment studies, and cost-benefit analyses are solicited by agencies and

organizations in Spartanburg County and other parts of upstate South Carolina. One such analysis demonstrated that the services of a small local nonprofit mental health agency result in cost savings of approximately \$2.5 million per year to county tax payers. Analysis of the direct economic impact of the local arts partnership demonstrated a \$9 to \$14 million dollar contribution to the local economy in the 2008–2009 fiscal year. These are interesting findings that are not limited to improving public relations, as return on investment is carefully studied in Spartanburg County and funding is allocated accordingly.

Benefits to the University

While the benefit of the MSI to the Spartanburg community is clear, there are also numerous internal benefits to the university.

Superior Fulfillment of the Metropolitan Mission

Traditionally, the university's engagement with, and impact on, its community is articulated in terms of outreach and service as manifested in faculty research and student service learning opportunities. However, while such activities certainly elevate institutional recognition, they do not directly impact the communities themselves in a lasting manner. There is an increasing awareness that metropolitan universities must expand engagement activities to make a real difference in the quality of the communities in which they reside. This is the objective of the MSI. As a publicly engaged institution, there is no better way that USC Upstate demonstrates the application of institutionally-generated knowledge for the benefit of the community.

Increased Scholarship

The presence of an on-campus institute whose purpose it is to generate community-based translational research also supports and facilitates increased faculty and student scholarship. Because MSI-based scholarship is translational, it is synergistic and high quality, capitalizing on a multi-disciplinary approach and liberating innovation.

Resource Acquisition

Although the MSI's Community Indicators Project work is pro bono, the balance of the MSI's work is contracted on a fee-for-service basis. Translational research at the university level is "cutting edge," and there is strong support for it by federal agencies and private foundations that provide grants to local government and nonprofit agencies.

Recognition by Decision-Makers

In the current environment of ever-decreasing state funding for postsecondary institutions, it behooves institutions to widely demonstrate their relevance to the community, relevance that extends beyond educating future citizens. The relevance of the MSI's work is quantifiable, and the translational nature of the MSI's work allows for easily demonstrated return on investment. Further, the public relations benefit of strong relationships between the MSI and the community makes a strong case for robust funding of the university by state-level decision-makers.

Conclusion

The Metropolitan Studies Institute at USC Upstate provides vital translational research to Spartanburg and the other communities of Upstate South Carolina. Approximately one-half of the MSI's work is devoted to collection, analysis, and reporting of community indicators data as a pro bono service to the community. This service is the basis of local nonprofit funding and programmatic decision-making in the area. Other MSI projects include various original research projects, program evaluations, survey research, and economic impact studies. This research provides income to the university, as well as recognition of the vital and meaningful role the university plays in the community.

References

Corporation for National and Community Service. 2011. "Volunteering in America 2011." Accessed November 10. <http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/SC/Spartanburg>.

Stockwell, John. "The Spartanburg County Compact: College Degree Attainment in Spartanburg County." Unpublished manuscript, 2008.

U.S. Census. 2011. "American Community Survey 2011." Accessed November 1. <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

Author Information

Kathleen Brady, PhD, is the Director of the Metropolitan Studies Institute at USC Upstate in Spartanburg, South Carolina. As the lead researcher, she coordinates all MSI work.

Kathleen Brady
Metropolitan Studies Institute
USC Upstate
800 University Way
Spartanburg, SC 29303
E-mail: kbrady@uscupstate.edu
Telephone: 864-503-5901
Fax: 864-503-5995