Areas of Research and Scholarship Excellence Nomination

Behavioral and Experimental Social Science and Policy Research

An Established and Interdisciplinary Area of Excellence

Executive Summary: In terms of national and local priorities, experiments are the gold standard for drawing causal inference and have received a large amount of attention in the last couple of decades from the popular media for advances in behavioral economics and behavioral public policy. In the last two decades, national governments in the US and the UK have developed experimental public policy units. The success of behavioral economics and behavioral policy has also furthered interest in the philanthropic sector. These units are funding and supporting ever greater experimental public policy research increasingly at the sub-national level such as the City of Charlotte's experiments with Bloomberg's What Works Cities initiative.[1]

At least since the 1980s, UNC Charlotte has been a leader in behavioral and experimental social science and public policy research. In the last couple of decades, the researchers at UNC Charlotte have made increasingly significant contributions to the growing field of behavioral economics and behavioral public policy. New initiatives at the University such as the Public Opinion Learning and Sentiment Lab (POLS Lab) have further increased the ability of faculty to do interdisciplinary, experimental policy research in areas such as housing policy, education policy, government management, and geography to name a few.

At UNC Charlotte we are developing new experimental research methods related to social science and public policy. Joseph Dippong in Sociology has been an innovator with his small group experiments that look at biosocial mechanisms to group interaction, and he has received external funding by the Army Research Office and NSF. Artie Zillante has innovated with research and teaching a course that combines Game Theory and Experiments. Jim Walsh has developed the use of conjoint experiments that are now being used throughout political science and even in other fields like geography. The POLS Lab has innovated in emotion detection experiments and has developed omnibus experiments for a low cost experimental option. The omnibus experiments have allowed several students at the undergraduate, masters, and PhD level to run experiments. This experience with experiments has pushed our students into achieving positions at top universities including R1 universities.

While UNC Charlotte has strength in this area and is notable for the number of academic units that are making contributions, the field is developing quickly. Top research universities are building their own labs and developing greater research capacity for policy experiments. Assuming the level of resources of a top R1 university, some strategic investment areas for behavioral and experimental policy research are as follows:

- Do field experiments in partnership with governments and NGOs
- Teach a PhD seminar across departments on emerging experimental approaches to train the next generation of scholars

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[1] Readers who are unfamiliar with experimental policy research, or the related field of behavioral economics, are encouraged to first read the section *Alignment with Regional and National Priorities* to understand the uniqueness of these types of experiments in social science research and their importance to public policy.

- Develop seminars at the undergraduate and masters level in different departments to build a pipeline of students into this field of policy research and practice
- Apply for greater levels of external funding for experimental research
- Tackle even more systemic policy problems that stymie governments and NGOs