Strategic Outreach to Local Government

Project(s): Informing county-based economic development (ED) decisions: A scientific foundation for strategic outreach (Brown; 2012 – 2015).

Researcher: David Brown

Need: Multiple forces have increased the significance and impact of local policy and decision-making in the United States, particularly in the realms of agriculture and food systems, land use and energy, and local responses to climate change. Research on how to enhance the effectiveness of research-based information, training, and other university resources in the decision-making processes of local policymakers is critical to support balanced and effective policy decisions.

Approach: Brown and his team used case studies and focus groups to evaluate hypotheses on the important pathways of influence in the political decision-making process. A literature review on the ways that local government officials learn and distill complex information into policy informed their hypotheses. The case studies were conducted in communities that varied along socioeconomic dimensions (e.g., population size, urban-rural mix, economic growth, ethnic and racial diversity) and by county government structure.

Results and Impact: The group identified several influential themes that determine how or why academic research may be used in the local government decision-making process. The first focuses on the attributes of the decision, such as the level of complexity, the level of controversy, or the potential impacts. The potential pathways of influence are particularly twisted when the issue evokes deep-seated controversy. Characteristics of the decision-making body, such as legislative structure or political diversity, are also important. Attributes of individuals involved play a significant role, including their experiences and values, leadership skills, and credibility. Finally, the role of trusted campus-county intermediaries, such as CCE educators, became a focal point of the research. This project took 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.