

THE POLICY SCIENCES CENTER, INC.

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MYRES S. McDOUGAL
Chairman (1906-1998)

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Vice Chairman

ANDREW R. WILLARD
President

Please Reply to: DR. LLOYD ETHEREDGE
7106 Bells Mill Road
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August 14, 2002

Dr. Anita K. Jones, Chair
National Science Board -
Committee on Strategy and Budget
4201 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22230

Dear Dr. Jones:

I hope that your Committee will recommend and support the initiative for NSF Evidence-Based Policy Centers described in the enclosed correspondence with Senator Barbara Mikulski.

The Centers will increase the effectiveness of NSF in meeting its goal to provide useful scientific information for the nation and for the policymaking community, at all levels of government and in all states. I think that Congress will be delighted to have the annual quantitative measures of progress that you can supply as part of this initiative.

By emphasizing the increased benefits from social science, I hope that I have not saddled this proposal with an albatross that will kill it. It might be a good idea to begin these NSF Centers with a wide invitation (on the model of www.ahrq.gov) and build research and liaison programs depending upon demand in all areas (e.g., environmental science).

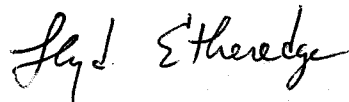
However, Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, when he was Chairman of ALCOA, also was a civic leader in Pittsburgh and spoke often (with frustration) of "what we could learn for several hundred million dollars" of well-placed investment in national research. I think that he was right.

I beg you not to mistake the embarrassing disarray and recent lackluster performance of academically-based social science disciplines to be indicators of the rapid progress we could make with this institutional innovation.

As this initiative gets underway, I think you will find that the distinction between academically-based scientists and a "laity" public begins to blur. We have many science-trained citizens, but people whose minds have mastered calculus have almost nothing to work with in public policy.

For example, I would think that, with just a few moments thought, each member of the National Science Board could begin to generate a good list of questions for these Centers that would benefit their own communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Lloyd S. Etheredge".

(Dr.) Lloyd S. Etheredge, Director
Government Learning Project

cc: Dr. Norman Bradburn
National Science Board

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August 8, 2002

Senator Barbara A. Mikulski
709 Hart Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Mikulski:

Thank you for your recent leadership to secure a major increase for the NSF budget, including strengthening its environmental program.

I think you will agree that the social sciences have been one of the most disappointing areas of NSF grants in recent years, at least if we are seeking practical results of benefit to the public. May I suggest an innovation that could dramatically benefit state and local government and public policy in our state of Maryland, and in other states?

What would you think about creating a network of NSF-supported Evidence-Based Policy Centers that would receive questions from state and local officials; from civic groups; and from individual citizens? The only requirement will be that they plan to use the answers. Advisory committees will rank the questions and the Centers will begin to answer them.¹

The Evidence-Based Policy Centers will be established by competitive, five-year, grants like other NSF Centers. Non-academic institutions (e.g., the National Governor's Association and for-profit consultant firms) also can compete.

Each year, your Committee and Congress will receive, with an appropriation request, quantitative measures of annual progress. You will know the questions asked; how many have been answered; how many await funding; the research plans and the specific links between appropriations and how long it will take each question to be answered. Members of Congress will know the constituencies being served.

As you know from your leadership in fighting for the people of Maryland on such issues as the Chesapeake Bay, womens health, and predatory lending, the ability to bring forward evidence about existing conditions strengthens the democratic process.

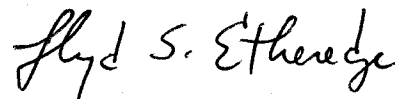
Civically-engaged people will love this idea. There is a lot of civic brain-power in Maryland that can be brought online; And capable people in state, city, and county government who will use the new service. Once the new science partnerships are available, for example, I think you will have citizens asking for benchmarking data and best practices, from around the nation, to stimulate ideas about how to make government programs more effective and efficient. And new questions that can inform specific decisions: Today, if a local school board wants to know whether to put money into all-day kindergarten, or reduce class size below 15 in grades K-3, or if educational software is good enough that they should use their money to buy many more computers for these early years, there is no easy way to get a reliable scientific answer. However if you take the lead to create these new Centers, we can organize an evidence base and answer the questions.

The (peer-reviewed) answers will be posted on the Internet, Centers also can specialize, solicit questions, build research programs, and develop liaison services. Centers also could be established for environmental policy and other areas that draw upon NSF's expertise in the physical sciences.

There is a successful example, with bipartisan support, in the 12 Evidence-Based Practice Centers in the US and Canada operated by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality at HHS (www.ahrq.gov).

I know that Dr. Rita Colwell is open to ideas for NSF-supported research that can respond to national needs. I think many of my colleagues in academic social science would support your leadership (and hers) for a new NSF program that provides responsive, honest-broker support to democracy - and (finally!) annual, measurable progress.

Yours truly,



(Dr.) Lloyd S. Etheredge, Director
Government Learning Project

cc: Dr. Rita Colwell, NSF

1. The open rankings and criteria will be published on the Internet. The criteria to prioritize the questions might be: a.) the commonality of the question; b.) the potential benefits of knowing the answer; c.) the existence of unexplained variations, new ideas, or theoretical disputes suggesting that research can be productive; d.) the availability of existing research that can be drawn upon; e.) The cost to answer the question that makes it prohibitive for civic groups or local and state governments to undertake the research themselves.

Any researchable & worthwhile question could be submitted: benchmarking and identifying best practices in our federalist system; reviews of published literature; or requiring original data.