

# Academic BRASS

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## Laying the Groundwork for a Federal Statistical Research Data Center

In the fall of 2017, I was asked to look into "what it would take" to start a Census Research Data Center (RDC) in St. Louis. I knew there were only a few of these secure centers in the country where researchers could access confidential microdata from the Census and health agencies like the CDC. The request wasn't urgent, but the head of our division was curious about how we might be able to get access to this data, which was becoming more desirable to the PhD research economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Happily, the Census provides [Guidelines for the Development and Operation of a Federal Statistical Research Data Center \(RDC\) or RDC Branch](#), but they are only a starting point. After reviewing the guidelines, I interviewed several Executive Directors of existing RDCs, many of whom were willing to share documents they had used when starting their own centers. As a result of my investigation, we decided that applying to host a [Branch RDC](#) as opposed to a Core Center would be the best route. Taking the branch route would allow us to forgo a complex grant proposal process with the National Science Foundation and streamline our proposal to the Census.

Using the information from the guidelines, the results of my conversations, and my own research, I presented a summary to the Vice President and Executive Vice President of the Bank's Research Division, breaking down the requirements into three parts: We needed to show specific research use cases for the data, find a space for the center, and pull together the necessary funding. In order to demonstrate a strong need for the data, we needed specific project plans from faculty about how they would use the data if they had access. This required reaching faculty at multiple institutions in the area quickly enough to meet the Census's annual spring deadline for the application.

I started emailing my network of local business, government, data, social sciences, and health sciences librarians about the project. In early 2018, I invited the librarians to a presentation to hear about how these unique data could benefit our local research communities, and how I needed their help to make this a reality. Luckily, a few of them took up the cause and started reaching out to their faculty directly. Susan Fowler at Washington University in St. Louis, Rebecca Hyde at St. Louis University, and Renee Gorrell at the Goldfarb School of Nursing were especially instrumental in getting this process started. They began with emails, but quickly started giving presentations of their own at faculty meetings or one-on-one with interested faculty. Rebecca Hyde invited a Census Administrator to present on the data to her faculty and in so doing, also got the attention and support of her university's Office of the Vice President for

Research. We started getting project ideas from faculty, but this was only part one of the three part puzzle. It quickly became clear that gathering the necessary commitments would put us on track to apply no earlier than spring 2019.

In early September 2018, I attended the [Research Data Center Annual Conference](#) to learn more about RDCs and to talk with those involved. It was a great opportunity to connect with the people from the Census who ultimately will decide whether to approve our proposal. Later that fall, we arranged for a visit from another Census Administrator in the region. With this visit, we reached two new groups of interested faculty, staff, and librarians with in-depth information about these unique data resources. There were also two economists with dual appointments here at the Bank and a local research university who were invaluable in reaching out to faculty and leaders at the university. Their efforts helped to inspire some excitement and aided us in the search for funding partners.

Although faculty outreach was going well, the message wasn't reaching the administrators and senior leaders. Again, by talking with my librarian colleagues, we gradually compiled a list of administrators who could help us find the physical space and the funding. I decided to give another presentation, this time directly to the administrators. I invited about 10 people to a meeting at the St. Louis Fed to learn more specifics about our plans to establish a Branch of a Federal Statistical Research Data Center. In addition to many of the invited guests, some additional representatives, including a Vice Dean of Faculty & Research who would turn out to be a key ally, joined us for the meeting in late October. Highlighting how a center would help us attract and retain top research talent, and would help faculty achieve success in their fields, I gave my best pitch about why St. Louis research institutes need the data and pointed out that many of their peer institutions already have access to the data.

As an action item after the presentation, we asked them to tell us who the best point person was at their institution to help us move this forward; some of them volunteered themselves. At this point, the project felt solid enough to move forward, and we set our own deadline of April 1, 2019 to submit the proposal (in line with the Census's preferred spring submission timeframe). After the presentation, we held several meetings to answer our new partners' questions and work out the finer points of the proposal. Over the course of those meetings, two things happened: We were able to secure the financial commitment necessary from each institutional partner, and one of the universities made a pitch for housing the center on their campus. After 12 months of exploration and network building, we finally had the space and funding we needed.

Now that we are about to submit our proposal to the Census, I'm reflecting on how the strong network of librarians was the first step toward building intellectual and financial support for the project. From speaking with faculty and administrators, to inviting Census Administrators to present, across private, public, and special research institutions, our colleagues did a remarkable job bringing together the right people needed to accomplish a goal that will ultimately result in facilitating important new research; research that is simply not possible without these restricted data resources.