Louisiana EPSCoR
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Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research

EPSCoR: Not Just Another Acronym

You read about it in our newsletter. You might see its name in the newspaper or hear about it from friends and colleagues. But do you really know what EPSCoR means? What it's all about? What it has meant to Louisiana?

It has, in fact, meant a great deal to Louisiana. As of June 2005, Louisiana EPSCoR has, for example, been responsible for bringing in over $123 million in federal grants to the State. It has benefited literally all of the State's universities in terms of improved research infrastructure and opportunities for their science and engineering research faculty, undergraduates to graduate students, and postdoctoral associates.

It was an early leader in the drive for statewide collaborative research among universities. It even helped lay the groundwork for the Board of Regents Support Fund.

In the Beginning

EPSCoR – the Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research – was established in 1979 by the National Science Foundation in response to Congressional concerns that a handful of states were receiving an overwhelming percentage of federal research and development (R&D) funding.

"Historically, in1987, when Louisiana joined EPSCoR, five states were receiving 50 percent of all federal R&D funding. The total for all 18 of those EPSCoR states, including Louisiana, was less than five percent," says Dr. Gene D'Amour, chair of the first LA EPSCoR Committee, a position he held until 2003.

Why were the five top states doing so well? NSF studies concluded that successful scientists need specific resources to be productive: excellent laboratories, cutting edge equipment, outstanding graduate students to support their research, successful colleagues with whom to collaborate, and time to carry out their work. Scientists in the top five states had these resources; the EPSCoR states much less so.

How did the top states pay for these resources? "Studies indicate that they paid for them through federal dollars - the grants received from federal agencies supported their equipment and graduate students and the indirect cost recovery on those grants supported their laboratories, says Dr. D'Amour, Xavier University's senior vice president for resource development. "Adding insult to fiscal injury, states such as Louisiana were providing a significantly higher state cost share on federal grants than those at the top."

Thanks to the LA Education Quality Trust Fund

"Admission to EPSCoR requires more than the minimal eligibility level based on lower federal research and development funding. A state must also demonstrate a commitment to developing its research bases and improving science and technology research and education programs at its universities and colleges," says Dr. Harold Silverman, who succeeded Dr. D'Amour as LA EPSCoR chair. "When Louisiana first applied for membership, it was eligible in terms of funding, but ineligible in terms of commitment. Nor does membership ensure grants; it's a merit-based program that uses experts to review funding applications."

It was the creation of the Louisiana Education Quality Trust Fund (LEQTF) and its Louisiana Education Quality Support Fund (LEQSF) that opened the door for Louisiana's acceptance into EPSCoR. In September 1986, with overwhelming voter support, the Louisiana Constitution placed the bulk of proceeds from a settlement between the State and federal governments over some offshore oil and gas revenues into a permanent trust fund for education - the LEQTF, sometimes referred to as the 8g Fund.

"The first EPSCoR Committee, then titled the Louisiana Stimulus for Excellence in Research Committee, was formed by the Board of Regents in 1985. Its charge was to plan and implement a program to improve Louisiana's status for federal research funding. The committee created the first statewide interuniversity research forum and conducted a statewide survey identifying the barriers facing Louisiana scientists in acquiring federal research and development funding," says Commissioner of Higher Education E. Joseph Savoie.

"At the request of the Board, the EPSCoR Committee, using NSF standards as the model, developed the

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Louisiana EPSCoR: Catalyst for Statewide Collaboration

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1988 strategic plan and evaluation system for higher education's portion of the Trust Fund, which was then approximately $270 million."

The monies available to higher education from the trust fund interest earnings are appropriated annually by the Legislature to LEQSF, also known as the Board of Regents Support Fund (BoRSF). The Board, in turn, allocates the funds to universities and colleges for carefully defined research efforts, endowed chairs, the enhancement of academic areas, and recruitment of superior graduate students.

To date, the BoRSF has allocated over $33.4 million to provide the match required by some federal agency EPSCoR grants. Like NSF, LA EPSCoR uses out-of-state experts to review funding proposals, which are awarded on a merit basis. Besides NSF, theBoR Louisiana EPSCoR has been awarded grants from other federal agencies that followed NSF's lead and formed their own EPSCoR programs. These include the Department of Energy, Department of Defense, National Institutes of Health, Environmental Protection Agency and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

A Catalyst for Statewide Collaborations

"Prior to 1986, competition among Louisiana universities was the norm," says Dr. Michael Khonsari, LA EPSCoR project director. "They were competing over an ever decreasing pie, rather than trying to increase the size of the pie. Louisiana EPSCoR served as a catalyst for changing Louisiana's research culture by promoting multi-institutional collaborations.

"We leverage State government investments by identifying the research strengths of our universities to determine collaborations that best meet the goals and objectives of the various EPSCoR federal programs and will enhance the economic development of Louisiana."

Citing the NSF EPSCoR 2004 $9 million grant for the Center for Biological Modular Microsystems (CBM^2) as an example, Dr. Khonsari notes that it composed of an interdisciplinary, multi-institutional research team that draws upon the significant advancement in micro-nano technologies made during previous NSF EPSCoR funding.

Participating institutions are Louisiana State University and A&M College, Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, Tulane University Health Sciences Center, the J. Bennett Johnston Center for Advanced Microstructures and Devices (CAMD), and Xavier University of Louisiana.

"The strategy has proven most successful, as evidenced by the increasing number of EPSCoR federal grants. Between the nine years of 1987 and 1996, Louisiana had received $40 million in federal EPSCoR grants. As of June 2005 - a period five months short of another nine year period - that total had increased to $122,230,024," says Dr. Khonsari.

"NSF EPSCoR's goal is to maximize and grow the potential inherent in a state's science and technology resources and encourage use of those resources as a foundation for economic growth. And that is exactly what LA EPSCoR has done and will continue to do," adds Dr. Silverman, LSU Interim Vice Chancellor of Research and Graduate Studies.

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