

Communicating Student Research at SUNY New Paltz to State and Local Elected Officials

One way the State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz connects student researchers with local municipalities and state government is through the work of its Center for Research, Regional Education, and Outreach (CRREO, <http://www.newpaltz.edu/crreo/>). CRREO serves as the principal mechanism through which the institution raises its level of engagement with communities, governments, not-for-profits, and businesses in the Hudson Valley region of New York State.

SUNY New Paltz, the only residential four-year public university in the Mid-Hudson area, is centrally located in the region. It is equidistant from New York City and the state capital in Albany, about 75 miles from each. The college's geographic location in the Village of New Paltz provides opportunities for engaging students in projects related to local, regional, and statewide issues. A critical part of the CRREO mission is to inform citizens and policymakers of research findings and associated recommendations so that they may make evidence-based, informed decisions on various public issues. Through its research with undergraduates, publications, conferences, and consultation with local leaders, CRREO plays an important role in addressing three of the eight central points of the SUNY New Paltz institutional vision: linking student intellectual growth with faculty scholarship, helping to meet regional economic needs, and being a cultural and intellectual hub. The center's work also advances the creation of vibrant communities in the Hudson Valley in accord with "The Power of SUNY," the plan that guides SUNY's statewide efforts.

Background

"The Wisconsin Idea" of bringing university resources to bear in support of communities has long been a part of the public university mission in the United States (McCarthy 1912). Several years ago Gerald Benjamin, then dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences at New Paltz, sought to strengthen the college's efforts toward this end with the creation of CRREO. He had the strong support of the institution's president and obtained research funding with the aid of New York Senator Charles Schumer to accomplish this goal. Benjamin, who is currently the associate vice president for regional engagement and oversees CRREO, is

an acknowledged expert on state and local government in New York State. He served in the Ulster County Legislature as Majority Leader and Chairman, as well as director of the Center for New York State and Local Government Studies at SUNY's Rockefeller Institute of Government in Albany. He has worked with a number of New York governors on issues including revision of the state's constitution and local government efficiency. Benjamin's experience played a role in the establishment of the CRREO program and continues to contribute to its reputation and growth.

The center was established in 2007, and Benjamin became its head in 2008. Directly reporting to the college president, CRREO conducts and publicizes research on regional topics, connects and partners with local and state government to initiate reforms, and works to foster intergovernmental collaboration and community engagement. CRREO offers a variety of opportunities for students to participate in research activities that support those goals.

CRREO has a five-person staff: Director Gerald Benjamin, Deputy Director Kathleen Tobin, Assistant Director Janis Benincasa, Research Associate Joshua Simons, and Secretary Janina Scuderi. A sixth colleague, Eve Waltermaurer, a faculty member in the Sociology department, is currently serving as Research Director, using her sabbatical year to focus on conducting the CRREO evaluation studies. In order to stay connected to the student body via the classroom, both Benjamin and Tobin teach: He teaches courses on local government and state government, she teaches Introduction to Sociology and Research Methods.

The center's office also includes work stations for seven student research assistants and has computer capacity to support the data collection and analysis, mapping, and reporting needs of the center's research projects. CRREO has an eight-member advisory board of public and private-sector leaders from the region. The advisory board's input and oversight help to ensure that CRREO research is informed by practitioners and maintains a focus on regional issues of current concern.

Research Goals

CRREO seeks to conduct research on regional topics with the expectation that high-quality information will help to develop local solutions and advance needed changes at the state and local government levels to meet regional needs. The center designs, conducts, manages, and produces studies on:

- local government reform and restructuring;
- regional approaches to economic development;
- regional delivery of local public services;
- land-use planning and environmental policy;
- intergovernmental collaboration;
- local public finance;
- performance of local governments in key areas of policy and administration;
- needs assessment for regional governments and not-for-profits; and
- performance assessment of state and local public programs and agencies.

In a 2010 CRREO survey, four in ten SUNY New Paltz faculty members reported conducting research that focused on the Hudson Valley, and nearly three in ten taught courses that focused at least partially on the region. Activities ranging from brainstorming to grant writing are used to encourage faculty to build regionally based service activity and research into their scholarship and teaching. CRREO has provided funding in support of faculty who develop courses related to Hudson Valley policy issues or who use CRREO research and datasets for instructional materials. This support has resulted in new courses, for example “Prisons and Prisoners in the Hudson Valley,” and numerous examples of dataset analysis in courses with topics ranging from school lesson-plan development to social inequality. A close relationship between CRREO and faculty members serves several important purposes. While the CRREO staff members have expertise in a variety of research areas, faculty members contribute additional and varied research experience. Regular course offerings provide students with technical and methodological skills that provide a foundation for participation in CRREO research. Faculty members also play an important role in communicating CRREO activities and opportunities to students.

Since its inception, the center’s policy has been that all of its projects involve paid student participation and that the CRREO internship program will provide opportunities for undergraduate students to play an active role in research projects. The center’s programs are open to all undergraduate and graduate students with experience in a relevant area of study; because SUNY New Paltz is largely an undergraduate institution, most student workers in CRREO research projects have been undergraduates. While some students learn about

CRREO opportunities via word of mouth and at campus job fairs, often they are recruited by CRREO staff members who teach courses or faculty members who initiate projects. Generally, a CRREO intern must be a New Paltz junior or senior with a minimum 3.0 GPA. Each student’s level of compensation depends on his or her skills and experience. Courses in research methods, statistics, and laboratory/technical experience provide students with appropriate skills to participate in the center’s research projects. Over the past five years, CRREO interns have come from majors in biology, business, communication, computer science, economics, education, English, environmental science/studies, geography, geology, political science, sociology, and psychology.

Prior to hiring interns, CRREO staff review applicants’ course transcripts, recommendations from professors, writing samples, and resumes. The top candidates are then interviewed by CRREO staff. CRREO hires interns who are willing to work collaboratively in a team environment, are detail-oriented, organized, and self-motivated. They must also have some familiarity with standard writing and quantitative software packages and be willing to quickly learn new skills, research methods, and work routines. In addition, they must be able to meet deadlines; be prepared to work a flexible schedule, typically 8 to 12 hours a week for an hourly wage; and be willing to work for at least one semester (although internships are often extended beyond that). The center’s work environment is professional, but informal. Written guidelines are issued to new students to orient them to the proper performance of their jobs while on projects, both within and outside the office. Almost all students hired have worked effectively and well at CRREO.

Student interns typically work independently on a defined aspect of a project. Depending on the nature of the study, students assist with extensive library and Internet-based background research; help compile databases; write annotated bibliographic entries, literature reviews, and memos on particular topics; assist with the production of written, tabular, and visual materials for research reports and presentations; help with the preparation of meeting-related materials; attend and participate in research team meetings; administer in-person surveys both on campus and across the region; and conduct other field research. Student contributions to projects vary, but data collection is a common activity. Data analysis is performed with more direct and formal mentoring.

CRREO staff members provide onsite mentoring and supervision for much of the computer-based activity, but field-work typically requires specific skill sets and is supervised by New Paltz faculty mentors. Since CRREO’s director, Gerald Benjamin, has been a faculty member at New Paltz for over forty years and is a former dean, his knowledge of and connections with faculty members in a wide array of departments have helped identify faculty mentors for proj-



Kathleen (KT) Tobin mentoring Caitlin O'Donnell, a political science major, at the CRREO offices. (Photo credit: Joshua Simons).

ects. CRREO grants typically include stipends to compensate faculty for supervising student research.

Conflicts may arise when scheduling student work. The CRREO staff recognizes the priority that must be given to students' course work, and staff members will alter productivity expectations during times when students are under academic pressure. The center is designed to encourage interaction between the students and staff. The regular interruptions that occur can decrease productivity with regard to other

aspects of the program's commitments, but this too is typical of mentoring. As opportunities arise, informal seminars are organized in CRREO's offices to explain the developing implications of ongoing projects to students.

Interns are supported with funds from external grants or from the relatively small program fund. CRREO includes requests for funds to support student interns in every grant application it submits. The center is fortunate to offer the Cetrino Family Scholarship and Internship, funded by the family of a New Paltz alumnus, which is awarded annually to a rising junior interested in a career in public service. It covers tuition, fees, and living expenses, and provides academic year and summer employment on CRREO research projects. Over the last three years, all the of the center's Cetrino Fellows, as well as other interns, have been most positive about the opportunity to engage in applied research with practical implications, as the following "testimonies" illustrate.

TESTIMONIES

"During my time at CRREO my knowledge of the local government systems was increased not only in the abstract but in the concrete; I was able to learn about the actual individuals serving in my local government. I gained a sense of pride and ownership for the region I call home and also a better understanding of how progress can be measured. I feel that I leave CRREO more informed, more inquisitive, and better able to understand the region both politically and socially."

—Janine Harris, Communication '10, Regional Well-Being study

"Being involved with research that is of importance to the community, and in line with my field of study, is a win-win for both. It has allowed me to enhance myself and at the same time provide a beneficial service, a sense of giving back."

—Kevin Kolvenbach, Environmental Geochemical Science, '10, Stream Bio-Monitoring study

"All in all, I think that having the opportunity to work with CRREO allowed me an experience which will help me function at and beyond the research desk for the rest of my life. I feel better prepared to handle a job in the 'real world' beyond the college bubble; I have sharpened my computer and interpersonal skills; I have a better understanding of bureaucracies and local government. Each one of these tools would have been worth working on separately, but being able to work on them all in one internship was a real gift."

—Emily Sobel, Asian Studies, '11, 2009 Cetrino Fellow, Regional Well-Being study

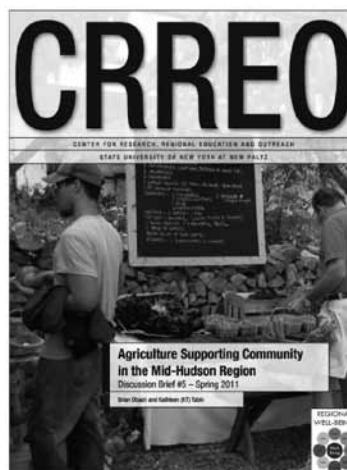
Funding to support research projects is obtained from a great variety of public and private sources. Director Benjamin's experience in government provides knowledge about funding sources, and many grants are available from municipalities or state programs through "requests for proposals"—for example, from the New York State Secretary of State's Office of Local Government Services. CRREO staff members write grants and consult with faculty members, when appropriate, for insight into discipline-specific potential funding sources. CRREO has developed a reputation that has led to additional funding opportunities after initial success in researching and disseminating research findings. Several student-assisted reports have played an important role in the center's obtaining additional grants and subcontracts.

Dissemination and Outreach

Because the overall goal of CRREO studies is to inform citizens and policymakers of research and make recommendations for improvement, CRREO commits a significant amount of time to outreach so that its studies don't just "sit on a shelf" after they are released. Staff members actively contact policymakers, community organizations, and businesses to identify topics of current and regional importance. Elected leaders are invited to address classes, and interns are placed in elected officials' offices in the region and the state capitol. Student interns offer valued staff assistance and gain experience that often leads to full-time employment after graduation. CRREO alumni have secured jobs working for political campaigns as well as in both state and federal offices.

Research findings are disseminated through a variety of means. *Discussion Briefs*, publications of approximately 5,000 to 6,000 words, are written to provide succinct, unbiased information on a specific topic to inform and prompt discourse among interested parties. Each brief summarizes research findings and contains a list of specific policy recommendations based on the findings. The campus design services unit, also staffed in part by student interns, produces an aesthetically attractive publication identifiable as part of an ongoing series. Printed versions are mailed directly to relevant elected officials and practitioners; electronic versions are emailed to CRREO's email lists and disseminated publicly on a variety of websites, including the CRREO web page. Several organizations with an interest in particular policy areas in New York State have also posted the briefs on their websites. Occasionally, briefs are written by regional experts not otherwise affiliated with the university, helping to build further connections for SUNY New Paltz in the region.

Students' work contributes significantly to these publications as students participate in multiple aspects of report preparation. In some cases, a student is a co-author of a report; in



Discussion Briefs: An example of a *Discussion Brief*. Each brief includes the same basic design, with a graphic related to the topic. For this brief, students participating in survey development and field interviews included Chris Utzig, Carolyn Burgess, and Jenna Dern; Layla Al Qaisi and Maria Davila worked on data entry and management; Emily Sobel conducted research on secondary data; and Ryan Ruetershan helped with cartography.

others a student will be credited with a particular significant contribution. For example, CRREO Research Associate Josh Simons, when an undergraduate, co-authored the CRREO *Discussion Brief A Collaborative, Regional Approach to Jailing in the Hudson Valley* with Gerald Benjamin (Benjamin and Simons 2009).

Approximately six months after the release of each *Discussion Brief*, CRREO organizes an on-campus conference to discuss the publication and its potential impact. Outside organizations often are invited to co-sponsor these conferences to further encourage wide participation, and relevant decision makers discuss specific legislative and regulatory issues using the common language established in the briefs. Local and state leaders are invited, and these conferences are frequently attended by members of the New York State Assembly and Senate or by their representatives. CRREO achieves a significant level of participation by elected officials because the center's work allows them to connect with the university to address crucial regional issues in a way that was never possible before. This has increased New Paltz's visibility as the region's university for public policy.

Students actively participate in these campus events, not only by attending but also by helping with the preparation of meeting-related materials, note-taking for possible post-event publications, and interacting with leaders. Although undergraduates do not typically present at these conferences, they have the opportunity to participate in professional interactions and networking through meeting elected officials and policymakers. A recent conference on the Ulster County Charter members of a local commission charged with proposing amendments to the recently adopted county charter listened to participants offer varying perspectives on the charter's strengths and weaknesses. Undergraduates extensively interacted with the commission members and those who testified. Cynthia Lowe, chairperson of the commission, later said that she and her colleagues found this conference valuable in informing their deliberations. This conference also generated significant local news coverage,

further enhancing the New Paltz image as an intellectual hub.

Elected officials also have praised the center's work. Kevin Cahill, a New York State Assemblyman and chair of that body's Energy Committee, has written that "The Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach has been an invaluable resource to me in my role as representative of the 101st Assembly District. Through their extensive work in the Hudson Valley, CRREO has successfully brought together students, policymakers and members of our local community to help solve some of the most pressing issues facing the region. The research conducted by CRREO has provided me with practical knowledge that I have used both in Albany and at home, to better meet the needs of the people I serve."

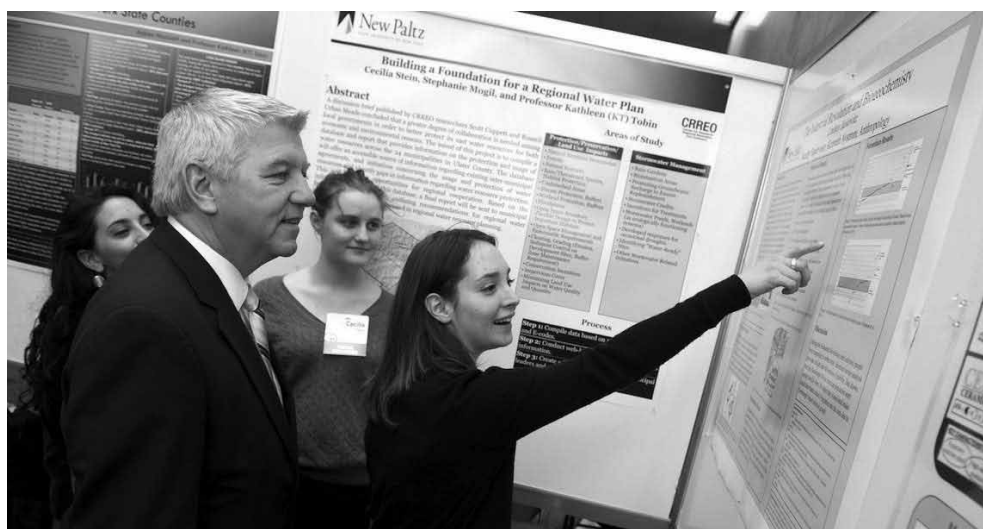
Ulster County Executive Michael Hein has said, "CRREO has been an incredible resource for Ulster County government and the entire Hudson Valley region. Their research work has provided valuable insights into how local governments can change and adapt to deal with current economic conditions and challenges. Dr. Benjamin and his staff have done an amazing job in a short amount of time and have quickly established CRREO as a premier research organization. We are very fortunate to have CRREO located at SUNY New Paltz, here in Ulster County."

Beyond the *Discussion Briefs*, students contribute to other articles on issues that are being actively considered by the state legislature. A major goal of Andrew Cuomo in his 2010 campaign for governor of New York was to reorganize state government. One undergraduate Cetrino fellow, Zackary Keck, gathered data and helped write a report funded by the not-for-profit organization Reinvent Albany concerning the degree to which reorganization of state government could be achieved by the governor via executive order. The report, which found that executive order power in this area was limited, was later published in the *Albany Law Review* with Keck as a coauthor (Benjamin and Keck 2010/2011). In another example, students gathered data for a mapping project, done in collaboration with New York Common Cause and the Long Island daily newspaper *Newsday*, on local legislative redistricting in Nassau, Suffolk, and Westchester Counties. Whether the students' work is published or not, their research experience undoubtedly contributes to

post-graduation success. CRREO alumni have readily secured jobs in a variety of fields and have been accepted to excellent law schools and other graduate programs.

Research studies with a geographically narrow focus often touch on issues that affect local municipalities. Student Denise Isseks and mentor Kerry Dean Carso wrote an architectural case study of a county government building and elementary school in neighboring Orange County being considered for demolition. CRREO's Regional Well-Being study, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, included a water quality component and a stream bio-monitoring project. The results of this project were disseminated as a written report and a student-delivered presentation to the New Paltz Town Board, which was televised on the local cable channel. As part of their presentation, the students recommended to local elected officials that the type of data they had collected be integrated into land-use decision-making.

Research on policy issues may take some time to concretely impact political decision-making and action, but several CRREO research projects have contributed to policy discussions and led to implementation of change. Several county legislators reported using the Regional Well-Being study during budget deliberations. Local sheriffs have also reported using Benjamin and Simons's *Jailing in the Hudson Valley Discussion Brief* to successfully advocate for policy changes. Undergraduate Kim Juszczak performed research in support of proposed revisions for the City of Newburgh's charter, and her findings were adopted as part of the referendum on



New York State Assemblyman Kevin Cahill at the 2012 Undergraduate Research Posters at the Capitol event in Albany with Andrea Mazziotti, Cecilia Stein, and Lindsay Jankovitz. Photo credit: George Simmons, NYS Assembly Photography

the charter that passed in 2011. It is expected that CRREO research findings will continue to play concrete roles in policy decisions.

Another way in which CRREO students connect with state legislators is at the student research showcase organized by the SUNY Faculty Senate and held at the state capitol. This annual showcase, modeled after CUR's Posters on the Hill event, alternates between a focus on undergraduate and graduate students. At this event, students meet directly with state legislators and their representatives, as well as with SUNY officials, to share the results of their research projects. The SUNY New Paltz selection process for participation in the showcase favors students who can demonstrate to legislators and the broader community the relevance of their projects to New York State. Thus CRREO projects are highly relevant for this showcase.

New Paltz students may also connect with elected officials through participation in the *Legislative Gazette* internship. The weekly *Legislative Gazette* was founded in 1978 by Alan Chartock, then a New Paltz professor, to cover public affairs in the state capital. Made part of CRREO in 2009, the *Gazette*, with Chartock as publisher and now James Gormley as editor, has helped prepare hundreds of students for jobs in journalism, government, and public relations, including two Pulitzer Prize winners. Published ten months a year, this weekly newspaper and its website, www.legislativegazette.com, cover the major stories originating in the state capital, as well as additional state news not found in other media.

Student interns reporting for the *Legislative Gazette* work every day at the state capitol alongside journalists from the *New York Times*, the *Albany Times Union*, and other major newspapers and radio and television outlets, and enjoy regular access to elected leaders and department heads. This semester-long program includes 35 hours of fieldwork per week, coupled with an equally important, rigorous academic component in journalism and political science. SUNY New Paltz provides some scholarship money to cover tuition for some undergraduates, six to eight in the spring and three or four in the fall, to work and live for a semester in Albany. Interns develop skills in journalism, web reporting, blogging, photojournalism, and video-to-web coverage.

Synergies for Students and Education

CRREO links the Hudson Valley region's academic community and policymakers, using undergraduate research to help identify and advance best practices and improvement in communities. Student engagement through research-based outreach is mutually beneficial for universities' educational missions and for the well-being of the com-

munities in their regions. Communities gain from having their problems and needs addressed with informed, well-grounded, professionally overseen analysis. Undergraduates benefit from learning about the diverse issues that affect communities and from connecting these to their academic disciplines. By disseminating solid research and holding conferences on important regional issues, CRREO enables both citizens and policymakers to build better communities and advance democracy in them. These activities support both the vision of SUNY New Paltz and the goals of the SUNY system.

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Kathleen (KT) Tobin is deputy director of the Center for Regional Research, Education, and Outreach at SUNY New Paltz where she is responsible for designing, conducting, managing, and producing studies on regional issues and concerns. She is also an adjunct sociology lecturer. Her most recent work includes directing the Regional Well-Being Project, the SUNY & Well-Being in New York State Counties Project, and the Regional Water Plan in the Ulster County Project. Tobin, a PhD candidate in sociology at SUNY Albany, has a masters in social research from Hunter College, and received a bachelor's in sociology from SUNY New Paltz.