



HOW FAR WE'VE COME:

NECHYBA DISCUSSES SSRI THEN AND NOW

SSRI recently celebrated its 10 year anniversary. How have things changed for the institute over the last decade?

Nechyba: I think the institute has gone through phases as it has tried to find the best ways to meet its mission. It began as a school-based center in modest quarters in Trent Hall—back when Trent was known as a student dormitory. Then it expanded dramatically as it became one of the seven signature institutes, and it moved off campus to Erwin Mill. In retrospect, that was a blessing and a curse—a lot of nice space, but disconnected from faculty and students who had been so much at the core of John Aldrich's original vision. So, SSRI primarily became a “center of centers”, a way to provide some basic infrastructure for a growing number of affiliated centers

to more effectively do their work. Part of that infrastructure was a grants operation that expanded to include faculty from the campus—but only in the sense that we were administering their grants. The problem was that, unlike most of the other institutes, SSRI lacked its own intellectual identity. It became what I think it could

become in Erwin Mill, but it lost its connection to the bulk of faculty and students. Then came the opportunity to move into Gross Hall and build a new institute—one focused on faculty and students as originally intended. And so, here we are, in some sense having come full circle but now knowing much more about how to be what we set out to be a decade ago.

It seems like sensitive data is one of the big themes of the “new SSRI.” What services do you all offer to help researchers with such data? Can SSRI help people with large and small projects?

Nechyba: We really have invested a lot in this area, and are continuing to invest more. This month, SSRI's Protected Research Data Network (PRDN) is coming on line—the beginnings of a truly 21st century way of facilitating research and collaboration around sensitive social science data. We'll be able to help researchers—big and small—with all sorts of confidential data, and we can do it in an environment built for collaboration. We'll also be able to create data resources for the social sciences there—resources like the Duke Education Data Center built around Duke's institutional data, or around Duke's incredible health data. None of this can be done, nor can the social sciences really make the progress they should, without confronting head on how we can protect data privacy while at the same time making research based on sensitive data feasible. So—a year's worth of planning is now yielding fruit, and our protected data network is open for business. Together with the infrastructure behind it, we also have a highly trained staff to assist with various related issues—issues like IRB approval for research with sensitive data, or developing data use agreements with data providers in government or the private sector.

Throughout the day the Connection Bar sees a steady flow of help requests. What feedback have you received about the Bar from students who have worked with consultants?

Nechyba: This has been a real success—and one where location really is a crucial ingredient. We had a help desk back in Erwin Mill, but I used to characterize it as “the loneliest place on earth.” Not so for the Connection Bar in Gross Hall. Students and faculty have raved about how helpful the consultants have been, and how in some instances they have also made important connections to others. But the biggest surprise to me is how well the bar has worked for many of the graduate students and post-docs who staff it. It turns out that they have created their own community—and are learning from each other as they help students and faculty and draw on one another's expertise. Each is stronger in some social science methods and weaker in others, but they are growing their methods tool kit in ways that truly are producing bottom-up cross-disciplinary engagements.

The Connection space is becoming known as a great study spot for students and a meeting place for faculty and numerous Bass Connections projects. What do you think is the appeal (besides the coffee and cookies, of course)?

Nechyba: It was really designed to be a space that is warm, welcoming and that screams “stay and connect.” Space, location, geography—all these things really matter as we think about how to design environments that get people to cross paths, to change habits and to identify with new places. Our hope had been that devoting as much space to the collaborative “Connection” environment would pay off—and it seems to be doing so in spades.




SPRING 2014
VOLUME 8, ISSUE 1

gist

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The new Education and Human Development Incubator (EHDI) will be living at SSRI-West. Why do you think this program is a good fit for researchers and SSRI?

Nechyba: When I was first approached about “housing” EHDi in SSRI, I was hesitant. As I mentioned earlier, I think SSRI has been hurt in the past by a lack of identity—by having lots of groups affiliate in ways that work for the groups but don’t add up to an institute. The last thing I wanted to do was to add another “group” and take away from the core identity we are trying to build for SSRI around data, methods and education. But then I came to realize that EHDi could be conceived in a way that does not actually make it something “housed in SSRI”—rather it could be integrally woven into the core of the new SSRI. One goal of EHDi is to build an EHD data infrastructure—but what better way to do that than within the social science data infrastructure we are already building. Another goal is to build innovative new data sets that connect EHD researchers across disciplines—which is also at the core of the SSRI Gross Hall vision. We were already talking about SSRI innovating in the education space at Duke—and once again EHDi fits like a glove. Finally, the EHDi effort will challenge us to incubate cross-disciplinary communities, not only around research, but also around other forms of engagement—something that will help us connect to a larger set of faculty and students. So I hope SSRI, with EHDi as part of its core, will be stronger in what it had already set out to do—and in the process will help to incubate a community around an area of strategic priority for the university. Whatever the future holds, I hope we get a lot of important work done in the meantime—for the EHD community and for the social science community more broadly. 



Tom Nechyba
Director, SSRI



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