

GUILFORD COUNTY, NC: LOCAL GOVERNMENT R&D AGENDA WORKSHOP

**A MetroLab Network Report Out
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Introduction

Guilford County, North Carolina is charting a course toward a more data-informed, human-centered approach to governance. The county has focused on embedding data and collaboration into the fabric of decision-making, recognizing that complex community challenges from housing and health to economic opportunity require integrated systems and partnerships. As noted by County Manager Victor Isler, the county's goal is not only to be efficient but to "touch all 550,000 residents" through smarter, more connected and data-driven services.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) and other higher education institutions in the area have been central to this effort. Those at UNCG and within the local government recognize the importance of pairing academic expertise with community-defined needs, training the next generation of scholars to engage with real problems, and ensuring that research leads to meaningful, measurable change.

Recognizing the value of this continued collaboration, MetroLab Network convened a Local R&D Agenda Workshop in Guilford County on September 3, 2025. The workshop aimed to identify where research could directly support the county's work in livability, health, education, and economic resilience, and to explore practical models for ongoing collaboration between government, academia, and community organizations.

Guilford County's Research Needs

Participants identified six recurring domains where applied research could directly support policy and operational decision-making:

- Data integration and service delivery
- Public health
- Workforce and economic development
- Education
- Transportation and infrastructure
- Governance and fiscal resilience

Topic 1: Data integration and service delivery

- How can Guilford County link Medicaid, housing, and social service data to identify individuals in crisis early and direct them toward coordinated care rather than fragmented interventions?
- What data-sharing frameworks and safeguards can allow departments to collaborate effectively while maintaining compliance with changing federal and state regulations?
- How can integrated data be used to track outcomes and assess whether programs truly improve resident wellbeing and reduce administrative burdens?
- What are the most effective models for building a shared data infrastructure across partner organizations?

Topic 2: Public Health

- How can Guilford County quantify the economic and social returns of investments in preventive and early public health interventions and social services?
- What local strategies and systems level changes can reduce disparities around health conditions and outcomes where they exist in Guilford County (e.g., diabetes, hypertension, kidney disease, infant mortality)?
- How can trusted messengers and tailored communications improve the impact of public health campaigns?

Topic 3: Workforce and economic development

- How can Guilford County align its economic development efforts to attract businesses while also supporting livability for existing residents?

- How can Guilford County and higher education institutions prepare residents for shifts in the labor market tied to automation, AI, and industry changes?
- What factors influence whether people stay, leave, or relocate to Guilford County, and how can this inform workforce and talent retention strategies?

Topic 4: Education

- How can data on student wellness, housing stability, and family income be used to inform policy decisions that strengthen learning outcomes?
- How can universities and local governments partner to create experiential learning pipelines that prepare students for community-based careers?
- What evidence-based models can improve health and safety in schools to support whole-child learning?

Topic 5: Transportation and infrastructure

- How can data guide an actionable regional transportation plan that balances economic development with sustainability and climate goals?
- What infrastructure investments could position the county for population growth in the future?

Topic 6: Governance and fiscal resilience

- How can Guilford County use fiscal stress testing to anticipate and adapt to changing policy environments, particularly shifts in federal and state funding?
- How can Guilford strengthen its partnerships with nonprofits and anchor institutions to stabilize community funding streams?
- What decision-making tools can improve transparency, connect spending to outcomes, and inform residents about how county resources drive impact?

How to Strengthen the Ecosystem for Research Collaboration

We asked workshop participants about how universities and local governments can better work together to address shared challenges. The responses from both sides reflected a strong desire for more regular collaboration, clear communication channels, and research that moves beyond theory to implementation. Participants agreed that while Guilford County already has a culture of partnership, the infrastructure for sustained, practical collaboration must be strengthened. Both government and academic representatives emphasized the need to connect research to community impact and align timelines and incentives. Specific suggestions for how to strengthen the ecosystem for research collaboration include:

- Designing research that meets real local needs
- Building consistent and trusted relationships
- Establishing clear points of contact and/or individuals with dedicated roles focused on matching and partnership development
- Clear definition and communication of problems we collectively need to solve in the County
- Aligning research and policy timelines - lifecycle of government work, academic work, and grant applications do not always line up and so early coordination and frequent touchpoints are needed
- Creating shared data systems and transparency tools
- Joint fellowships, internships, and small pilot projects that demonstrate impact

Observational Takeaways from Workshop

- The Guilford County workshop demonstrated deep mutual respect between practitioners and researchers, anchored by a shared belief in data's power to improve lives
- Participants called for research that drives decisions, not just describes problems
- Capacity constraints on both sides underscore the need for flexible, well-scoped partnerships
- Building public trust, both between institutions and with communities, was identified as essential for success
- Leadership transitions across the county and university systems offer a timely opportunity to institutionalize collaboration
- There is a strong appetite for applied interdisciplinary research that connects policy questions to tangible resident outcomes

About FAS and the Local Government R&D Agenda

Cities are often on the front lines of solving difficult and complex social issues such as affordable housing, mental health, and digital equity. Universities can serve as a key partner, producing cutting-edge research, ideas, and technology that could help cities solve some of these complex issues.

And yet, there is a disconnect between research and local government programs and policies. Why? We believe for two primary reasons: 1) research is often pushed, not pulled from local government and 2) research output doesn't necessarily align with how cities and counties work – and so it's difficult to adopt.

MetroLab aims to equip cities with science and research. And with philanthropic support, MetroLab is producing a national body of work called the Local Government R&D Agenda: a list of identified priority research areas that can address local governments' complex issues and needs. MetroLab aims to do this by working with a select number of cities and hosting workshops with nearby universities and colleges to ask the question “if you could get research on [blank], what would you want.”

By intentionally bringing these key stakeholders together, we can produce actionable research addressing complex challenges. For example:

- What if R&D efforts reduced the cost of affordable housing in half?
- What if city councils received draft policy language to make starting a business as easy as getting a driver's license?
- What if we discovered ways to expedite recovery funds delivery to low- to moderate-income neighborhoods, reducing wait times after a disaster event?

At the conclusion of the city-hosted workshops, MetroLab will work with federal agencies and congressional stakeholders to fund projects that would directly support and address the Local Government R&D Agenda. We hope to bring those projects back to cities, with MetroLab serving as a matchmaker of research and programmatic outcomes back to the local communities we partner with.

Appendix: Notes Captured from the Workshop

Workshop Question Responses

During the workshop, several interactive questions were asked of the participants. Those answers informed the summary above and are listed in full below.

For local government, what is one word you think of when you hear “research”?

- Red tape
- Protective
- Economics
- People
- Evaluation x2
- Analysis
- Impact x3
- Slow
- Planning
- Forecasting
- Community
- Data-driven
- Community benefit
- Slow but essential
- Equitable
- Assessment
- Proactive
- Politics
- Compromise
- Unintended consequences
- Hopeful
- Priority
- Bureaucracy
- Evolving
- Consensus
- Allocations
- Understanding
- Exploration
- Objectiveness
- Clarity

For university participants, what is one word you think of when you hear public policy?

- Peer-reviewed
- Red-tape
- PhD
- Directive
- Organization
- Equity
- Innovation x3
- Theory of practice
- Driver of all things
- Proof of concept
- Resource allocation
- Politics
- Program funding
- Structure
- Slow
- Data x2

In five words or less, how do you know who to work with from the other institution?

For local government:

- I have no idea - guess?
- Relationship networks
- I call someone there that I know and ask them who to talk with
- Prior relationships
- Networking

- Check the website & pray
- Ask Google
- Past experiences
- Seek people who are studying specialty areas
- Word of mouth recommendations
- Call a friend
- Ask someone
- Ask my staff for history
- Ask my colleagues

For university participants:

- Cold calls
- Random community meetings and events
- Managers office
- Networking
- Connections
- Title of department Google search
- Ask a navigator
- Referrals through contacts
- Based on shared goals
- Look up titles
- Bug people
- It's difficult
- I don't need to ask
- Shared interest
- Trust
- Commitment
- Track-record
- Ask someone
- Come to this workshop
- Trusted sources gained via existing relationship introductions
- Prior relationships

- Sometimes I don't
- Colleague recommendations
- Phonebook
- Reputation for getting things done

What myth do you want to bust to the other side?

For local government:

- That local government has money
- That local government can solve granular problems
- Local governments don't always have the money
- Local governments are not research institutions themselves
- Waiting for us to reach out
- Theory over practice
- What is important
- The WHY
- Not getting to the groundwater (need to look deeper to systemic and institutionalized issues)
- Understanding local populations
- Research for the sake of research (not practical, implementable, or shared)
- Need to get more pragmatic & into implementation science specific to our local community

For university participants:

- Lack of regular collaborative contact
- That the interests of local government are limited/restricted
- That they are not looking for faculty involvement
- Not understanding how to ask the best questions to address what local government wants
- High expectations of what is needed
- Being too academic/technical
- That they are separate
- We do not have clear definitions on problems we need to solve- sometimes we don't even know the problems
- Expecting to help without knowing the institutions

- not knowing what local gov wants/needs
- Lack of internal support for government contracts
- Understanding local populations
- Direction of data research ↔ county data
- Not listening
- Not working directly with the local government to meet the current needs they find in the community

For local government, if you could get research on [blank], what would you want?

- Target studies on potential solutions conducted with scientific rigor and non-biased
- Healthcare, especially mental wellness
- Financial impact, follow the money for housing, workforce, healthcare
- Early screening on diseases for early intervention: averted savings (health), workforce capacity, quality-of-life
- Population health
- Wellness and health indicators: we tend to have/collect morbidity and disease indicators - what to do RIGHT rather than what's wrong
- Data analysis coupled with specific strategies developed in collaboration with local governments.
- How to listen: insights from communities about what they think needs to be fixed and collaboration with communities to address them sustainably.
- Capacity and expertise mapping for partnership development
- Data informed research in dozens of areas
- Research and improvement in decision-making processes
- Effect of climate change on our water, land, and animals (and people) populations
- How government can improve health outcomes
- How government can improve public safety
- How government can address disparities
- Data on housing needs and capacity
- Information about what type of data would be needed to best answer the questions they want to answer
- Why people stay here
- Research on residents/community members satisfaction and needs, what do they want from their community?

- Why people leave?
- Diverse respondents and diverse models to collect data

For university participants, what research do you think local governments need?

- Behavioral health practical solutions
- A ten-year service needs estimate for government resources
- Current economic health of communities
- Regional transportation
- Human services and school systems collaboration
- True cost and benefits of economic development incentives
- Service effectiveness
- Economic mobility drivers - what actually gets results
- Improving resilience across local food systems
- Cost effectiveness of targeting efforts to reduce health disparities using Guilford County data
- Financial impact - follow the money
- The fiscal impact of federal funding into Guilford County and the economic cost of shifts in that funding
- Research on community trust and institutions providing value add
- Meta-analysis of asset mapping, resource gap across NGO + government over the last 10 yrs
- Decreasing health disparities through using social determinants of health
- Most effective use of public funds to support improved mobility in communities (including transit)

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