

KANSAS CITY, MO: LOCAL GOVERNMENT R&D AGENDA WORKSHOP

**A MetroLab Network Report Out
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Introduction

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?

As key government decision makers continue to be faced with difficult social issues and complex policy matters while being constrained by budgetary and political realities, MetroLab hosted a workshop at the University of Missouri-Kansas City to identify priority research areas and improve the dynamic between those decision makers and the local academic & research community in Kansas City, Missouri. This report is a summary of the discussion and input from the City of Kansas City at the July 19, 2024, workshop.

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.

Kansas City's Research Needs

The City of Kansas City, MO identified numerous research opportunities. A summary of these research priority needs include:

Economy & Finance

- A. What economic incentives can Kansas City utilize to improve attraction of businesses and new residents when competing with peer cities? What barriers or disincentives can Kansas City remove?
- B. What is the economic added benefit impact of improvements made in public health, transportation, housing and environment, when factoring for avoided costs?
- C. How can Kansas City measure the financial value (cost/benefit) of service departments in city government (i.e. internal services such as finance, IT, etc.)?

Climate Change

- A. How can we measure interventions to combat climate change?
- B. What is the positive climate impact of incentivizing work-from-home models?
 - a. How would this impact economic development goals?

Transportation and Accessibility

- A. Before and after analysis of measured transportation improvements.
- B. What improvements can be made to ensure Kansas City, and city services are truly accessible for residents?
- C. How can Kansas City better understand the status of its assets? How can we utilize technology for asset management tracking?

Public Health

- A. What are best practices for municipal health departments?
 - a. Scope of work
 - b. Best organizational approaches
 - c. Use cases driving impact
- B. How can we best track mental health interventions?
- C. How can the city track interventions that improve reductions in poverty?

Suggested Research Outputs

We asked workshop attendees about ways in which research (or the output deliverable) can be formatted in a way that is most useful to the City of Kansas City.

- A. Continuously collaborate with the client (the City) to ensure the research outputs are not disconnected from the problem.
- B. It's especially helpful when research includes comparisons to peer communities in the region.

- C. Research should be conducted specifically in KCMO, and at the micro-local neighborhood level when possible.
- D. Partner with the City to collaborate on community engagement efforts, leveraging the City's existing relationships to support research projects.
- E. Research should be accompanied by a clear statement of findings/conclusions. The room recognized that there can be limitations to published research (for example peer reviewed publications staying true to scientific processes and outcomes). City participants noted it's helpful to hear what are some true, frank recommendations that the City can consider. Is there a companion piece that can be made available to the research that is an "explainer" or applicable list of policy recommendations for local governments?
- F. Research outputs need to be written in plain language; easily understandable for non-academics and include recommendations.
- G. Context is helpful. Research should include a historical explanation of what brought you to this point in time.

Challenges to Overcome

The research needs of local government decision makers are not necessarily at the frontiers of research, how can we incentivize researchers to participate regardless?

Participants noted that relevant legal statutes are often viewed as a permanent barrier to desired outcomes. A recommendation is to integrate the legal community (Government and Academic) into the process so that the law is viewed at worst, as a temporary obstacle, and at best a creative tool for implementing solutions.

Academic researchers often are not incentivized to conduct applied research in the field of local government. They are not included in the "R1" point system. A noted recommendation for MetroLab is working with federal agencies to change policies around what may be considered in the R1 point system (including to add philanthropic funds to the point system, for example).

Academics do not like to provide recommendations which contain degrees of certainty, yet government decision makers want to have the comfort when making a decision which this brings.

How can we understand which communities are missing from our data collection, acknowledge the biases this causes in our outputs, and how can we correct for this?

Ideas to Move Forward

Can we incentivize more project-based learning at research universities in collaboration with the City of Kansas City, where the projects are modeled on the pressing issues of the City of Kansas City? Specifically, can we integrate community research into local colleges and universities?

How can we inject local government practitioners into the research space so that they are a part of the research process?

How can we incentivize academic researchers at the university level to conduct applied research with local government entities?

Conclusion and Next Steps

Local Government decision makers are grappling with questions far more essential than is generally understood; they are grappling with questions such as “what is an appropriate expectation of my department in my community?” They also want to be able to measure and quantify the impact their actions have. There is an appetite to work with the research community, but capacity is an issue.

Ways in which the university community can help:

1. Using a research agenda (like this!) or policy priority document (like a city comprehensive plan) to seek relevant research projects, and understanding who at the City may “own” that area of work.
2. Optimizing outreach. How can interaction be at its most efficient to limit strains on capacity for City staff

All participants had keen perceptions, both of themselves and their fellow participants. Those in the academic and NGO community have a perception of government as something which, while it has a process; is disjointed, laborious, out of reach and shrouded in mystery. When asked to provide one word to describe “public policy,” those in the academic and NGO community provided only one action oriented and positive response. Those in government perceive the academic community as being far too slow and drawn out, that the work they perform has a heavy reliance on data and collaboration, with an emphasis on theoretical application.

Yet, for all their perceptions, there is more respect and understanding between the government decision makers and the academics than they themselves are aware of. While academics and Local Government decision makers are hyper aware of the criticisms and stereotypes ascribed to themselves, those worst criticisms striking at their work ethic, intellect and character (ie: *for academics* elite, out of touch, ivory tower and *for government*

lazy, incompetent, not value adding) were not used to describe them or their work by the other group. In fact, those in government and academia have more in common with each other than they are aware of. Both groups want their work to be useful & purposeful, not simply put on shelf or going through the motions. Each of them feel constrained by outside pressures (financial, political, and structural) in their scope of work and bandwidth for decision making. Both want to be understood, valued, and want to collaborate, and they rely heavily on personal relationships and their network of contacts when seeking out that collaboration.

Ultimately, MetroLab aims to change the dynamic between local governments and the research community – empowering cities and counties to procure and prioritize research, while working with the university community to ensure research outputs work harmoniously with local government processes. We look to do this by developing a national Local Government R&D agenda to address the most pressing needs of local governments across the United States.

We are energized by the workshop in Kansas City. There is an enthusiasm in this community to work together in finding innovative solutions that will bring impact to the Kansas City community. If you have any questions or ideas for next steps in Kansas City, please reach out to us at info@metrolabnetwork.org.

Appendix: Notes Captured from the Workshop

Additional research areas identified by the City of Kansas City:

During the workshop, additional policy areas of concern were identified by the City of Kansas City as topics on which they want to make a difference but were not articulated as an issue for which research could be provided. These included: Behavior Change, Gun Control, and Systemic Poverty.

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.

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

Answers from local government (or local government adjacent) respondents:

- Leverage past relationships with researchers
- Existing personal connections or google
- Online directory & LinkedIn
- Contact the community/outreach office
- Personal relationship
- Have no idea
- Use RFI process
- Online search, ask colleagues, look at published research, reach out to an institution
- Networking over time
- Calling the only person we know from University
- Inquire with the appropriate department
- Network convenings or topical meetings
- Personal network
- Business school dean
- Professors I've lectured for
- Reach out to contacts at the institution and ask for guidance to identify the appropriate individuals or department office

Answers from University respondents:

- Who briefed the project at City Council?
- If I don't know a person, call MARC
- Call MARC when you don't know
- Follow the money
- My past history with city government
- Who has the funding?
- Who is open to university partnerships
- Long term relationships and those who answer the phones
- Reach out to my existing public sector partners

- Network
- Reach out to former students or through LinkedIn
- Reach out through alumni or colleagues
- Identify collaborative champions
- Who wants students to think through a question?
- Reputation
- Networking or community engagement department
- Internet search
- Publications
- Past collaborations
- Meeting network.

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

Answers from local government (or local government adjacent) respondents:

- We are smart, competent and driven people
- We are not complacent
- We are easy to work with
- “Unwillingness to collaborate”
- We are willing, just not always able due to time
- We want to innovate!
- Lacking knowledge - city staff are smart
- How much power we actually have
- There is no secret master plan about who to fund and why
- It doesn't have to be lost in translation
- We both do important work and add value
- Not interested in new ways of doing things - “we’re always looking for change”
- Municipal government personnel is inefficient or lazy
- Many city employees are mission driven and passionate about what we do.

Answers from University respondents:

- That we always move slowly
- Academics are elite
- Elite
- That we live in an ivory tower
- That we have tons of money
- That there aren't some of us who understand your pressures
- Universities have unlimited funds
- Some academics can work fast with right incentives
- “Academic” does not mean detached from reality
- Faculty/staff have no applicable expertise in the real world
- Not all academics only do theory. Pracademics exist!
- Elite, removed, tradition, slow moving

- Disconnected/out of touch.

“If you could get research on [blank], what would you want?”

Answers from local government (or local government adjacent) respondents:

- Intermediate measurement of climate change interventions
- More community driven research w/KC as site, more systems approved to KC and region
- New innovative income generating streams for local municipalities
- Landscape analysis on number/type affected by ADA issues (mobility, transportation, health, housing, social, digital)
- Systemic poverty
- Economic impact including avoided costs of public health, housing, transportation and environment data
- If public transportation drives the economy, what would an actual public transportation grid or system look like in Kansas City
- Neighborhood/population level mental health interventions
- Measuring subclinical mental health issues and interventions
- How tech can address the human condition
- Behavior change
- Gun control
- Technical research for asset management
- Transportation more research for before and after improvements
- Gun control
- Safe use of AI for cities ->policy issues -> risk management
- Research on comparative fees for common services across cities (especially local)
- Lighting fast ghg emission reduction infrastructure change
- How data can drive human issues
- Tax burden (comparative across cities)
- Ways in which local gov can improve the quality of family formations, especially as this relates to poverty reduction
- Debt and other metrics for peer cities (maybe as reflected - or not - in credit rating)
- Methods of restoring public trust in local public health

“What research do you think local government needs?”

Answers from University respondents:

- Infant/maternal health _____ by race and ethnicity
- How to increase (equitably) transit options in a car-oriented metro
- Local broadband data by race/ethnicity
- Effective policy interventions - across a wide variety of domains, potentially from other regions (ie, not the policies we’ve enacted here, but looking across the landscape)

- Not research predefined, but more engagement to define research initiatives of interest to meet community needs
- How to use AI effectively and responsibly in the public sector
- How to best employ AI or advanced tech to shape community growth
- Implications of Gen AI (good and bad)
- Tax burden by city or taxing entity
- Healthcare, workforce needs and pathway programs
- Uninsured integral to local economy
- How to use abandoned properties for affordable housing
- How to balance economic needs with social and environmental needs
- Economic incubators
- KCMO specific housing data (more district than the region)
- Civil and productive conversation
- Research that cuts across disciplinary boundaries
- Issue framing for wicked policy challenges
- Research that uncovers the needs of those not in the data sets
- Research on health, environmental, urban planning
- Research that leads to action
- Strategies on effective collaboration across silos
- Applied deliverables
- Research on health, urban planning, program development
- Public transportation impacts health access
- Public health and other data for targeting resources
- Workforce retention within the local government space
- More community-driven research w/KC as site
- More systems approved to KC and Region

“How do you prioritize research topics?”

Answers from local government (or local government adjacent) respondents:

- Highest political feasibility / where is there greatest momentum or need
- Staff capacity -> expertise -> funding -> time
- By law, grants available, and needs
- Based on solutions
- Research that starts with the end in mind comes first, Research that asks more questions, get answers last
- Based on community needs and wants
- As directed by elections and executive management
- Technical evaluations to address a need
- Available interest, capacity or energy
- By magnitude of problem -> by magnitude of intervention -> by funding priorities
- We think through our list of big existential questions, then assign them to interns/students who come along looking for work

- Need/Impact/Feasibility/Capacity/Rigor/Quality
- We react to the problem in front of us at the moment
- Priority/funding/timeline
- Prioritize based on what data suggest may have the largest impact for the lowest cost/what is actually feasible for local public health.

How can local government frame a problem to be an appropriate research question?"

Answers from University respondents:

- Know who should be receiving the questions
- Define the problem, is it researchable?
- A study/survey
- Peer review research
- Talk to researchers
- Local governments can/should stay part of the process to ensure the work meets the needs/goals
- Many academics do not have any university incentive to do “applied” research, Research that can be both theory and practice is often preferred
- Step 1 brainstorm all problems and barriers, Step 2 - prioritize, Step 3 - meet with university colleagues on framing
- Have a conversation to make sure the problem is clear
- Define and communicate how research can impact quality of life
- State problem and have conversation with researchers
- Will research methods really provide answers to your questions
- Clearly identify current policy, relevant policy history/background, and policy preferred outcome
- A balance of community interest to meet gaps in literature/research
- Academic work with questions, not services (students aren't only to provide labor)
- Ask questions with a lot of potential answers
- Ask long-form questions
- Have a process to accept recommendations

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