

IN THE BEGINNING...

THE ORIGINS OF THE RRC

and the Legacy of Steven H. Sandell

Now in its ninth year, the Social Security Administration's Retirement Research Consortium (RRC) is well on its way to being what Steven H. Sandell had in mind when he initiated it. As the base of new RRC scholars expands and the audience grows, the history of the RRC and Steve Sandell's contribution to it are worth recounting. Although Sandell did not live to see his ideas come to fruition, he is well remembered by Office of Policy (OP) staff and former colleagues. The RRC stands as a lasting tribute to his vision and hard work.

Howard Iams, Senior Policy Advisor within the Office of Policy suggests "the RRC has become, as the sociologists say, institutionalized." Iams describes the origins of the RRC as a fortuitous confluence of events and circumstances. In 1995, SSA was moved out of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and was returned to its original status as an independent federal agency. At that time Steve Sandell and Kalman Rupp were transferred from the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) within the HHS to the Office of Research and Statistics at SSA. Sandell served as the first Director for the newly formed Division of Policy Evaluation. According to Iams, "Up until that time, there had been evaluations and demonstrations,



Above: First Row (left to right): Lee Cohen, Howard Iams; Second Row: Paul Davies, Kalman Rupp, Steve Sandell, Suzanne Payne, Debra Bailey, Whitman, Jeff Shapiro

Left: Steven H. Sandell

Steve H. Sandell died in 1999 after a 16-month long battle with Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma.

but there really wasn't that much emphasis on evaluating policy alternatives. The Office was retitled the Office of Research, Evaluation and Statistics (ORES) and now included the evaluation function, which had been housed within ASPE."

Sandell began building the Division and adding staff. Howard Iams and two programmers (Jeff Shapiro and Larry Wilson) were

transferred from other parts of ORES. Other early staff included Kalman Rupp, Debra Bailey Whitman, Paul Davies, Lee Cohen, Suzanne Payne, Barbara Butrica, Paul O'Leary, Jim Sears, John Phillips and Minh Huynh.

Susan Grad, Deputy Associate Commissioner of ORES, recalls a briefing on OP's extramural budget with Peter Wheeler, the Associate Commissioner for ORES at the

time and John Dyer, Deputy Commissioner for Finance, Assessment, and Management. Dyer “threw out the idea of a consortium that he thought HCFA was using...Peter and I handed the idea off to Steve and he and Debra Whitman ran with it. Steve had some experience from when he had been at the ASPE, especially with the Institute for Research on Poverty at Wisconsin. The RRC that came into being was basically designed by Steve and Debra and based on that model.”

Grad continues “The resources we have available to us are either staff or extramural budget. Since, at the time, staff was very limited but the Office of Policy was a new organization with new responsibilities, the main goal was to greatly expand our ability to do research. However, the process for awarding grants on an individual basis is itself highly resource intensive.”

Debra Bailey Whitman, now Director of the Initiative on Aging with the Congressional Research Service (CRS), explains: “Steve and I looked at other government-sponsored research centers and the model of how government funds research and really gets the most out of it. We decided that the efficiencies of the center model made a lot of sense and having more than one so that they could compete and complement each other also made a lot of sense. We also set it up so that the center would be interdisciplinary because we wanted a broad perspective on the priority research areas we defined. The training element was very important, as we saw it, in order to build a base of scholarship moving forward. Thinking it

was important to increase access to and usage of relevant data sets, we also included this mandate to the centers. A fourth area was dissemination. One key element we designed with that in mind was the annual conference in DC to be sure the policy makers were kept informed of the research coming out of the centers and also to give the researchers themselves a chance to hear from each other and to cross-fertilize ideas. We designed a request for proposals (RFP) that had these elements.”

The Office of Policy did all of the work to develop an RFP (outlining the functions to be fulfilled and the major areas for research), and to set up the mechanism for reviewing proposals and review panel members. As with any grant, the Office of Acquisitions and Grants was involved and the Commissioner approved the final selections.

Howard Iams notes another important element in the conceptualization of the RRC: the Panel of Outside Scholars. “Steve’s experience with the Poverty Centers at ASPE informed his understanding of the importance of having an independent group performing oversight. From that experience, he also understood that it was important to have more than one center in more than one state with multiple researchers.”

“Until the RRC,” Iams explains, “SSA had commissioned grant research, but it was on an ad hoc basis. Usually, there wasn’t a lot of participation by the academic community. There were times when there was money set aside to do some research, and no one even applied. This approach of the RRC,

creates a much more active and highly engaged research program and, in a way, democratizes the process. We have much wider participation and a more diverse set of approaches than we would otherwise.”

The RRC has spanned two different presidencies and is still going strong. “We now have a set of procedures and a process that is accepted and works quite well,” notes Iams. “The scholars who propose work have quite a bit of discretion in defining the work they want to do and the SSA can define the subjects of highest policy priority and also have final say on funding of particular projects.” Susan Grad remarks, “The RRC has allowed us to fund hundreds of projects, to be affiliated with over 90 researchers in the field, to support the next generation of researchers, and to broaden the discussion about retirement. I certainly did not realize at the time how successful the RRC would be.”

Whitman is proud of the work she accomplished with Steve Sandell. In her work with CRS, she makes use routinely of research produced by the RRC. She notes, “The training component was very important to Steve, so I was pleased when the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College (CRR) named the award to junior scholars in his honor. This is an important part of his legacy.”

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