

# Understanding the Public: UNC's Survey Research Unit helps researchers collect high-quality data

During his first 10 years as a biostatistics professor at the UNC School of Public Health, Dr. William Kalsbeek collaborated with dozens of faculty members who relied on his expertise in survey research methods to conduct population-based research. Over time, Kalsbeek realized that those doing population-directed research needed an on-campus facility to offer a full range of specialized sampling and data collection services.

"Many of them doing telephone surveys during my first years at UNC would kind of set up their own seat-of-the-pants operations, get a few phones in an office, hire a few students, then start calling," says Kalsbeek.

It was obvious they could use some form of assistance in collecting data, he says.

So in 1990, with seed money from the UNC vice-chancellor for health affairs, the dean of the UNC School of Public Health, and the chair of the Department of Biostatistics, Kalsbeek established the Survey Research Unit (SRU) at UNC-Chapel Hill. Organizationally tied to the Department of Biostatistics, the SRU serves the whole university. "We've worked with departments across the entire campus, but especially those in health affairs," says Kalsbeek, SRU director. "We've also collaborated with researchers at Duke, Johns Hopkins and other universities in the state and across the country."

Collaborative research service is the SRU's primary mission. It helps researchers better understand the public by collecting data from random samples of the population, says Kalsbeek, who specializes in sample design. It gathers information to determine, among

other things, people's attitudes, opinions, habits, activities and states of health. By conducting these types of assessments, the SRU enables researchers to measure and predict health outcomes, as well as evaluate the effectiveness and feasibility of health-related interventions.

"There are all these experts who want answers to their research questions but have found no easy way to get them," says Dr. Robert Agans, SRU study director and questionnaire design expert. "They know the literature, they know the instruments, but they need data. That's when they come to us... when they want to do a survey."

The SRU and UNC's Odum Institute for Research in Social Science provide similar services to the university and community. Both have adopted the university's three-part mission of teaching, service and research. However, staff at the

SRU do more actual data collection, while Odum has concentrated on training and facilitating the activities of researchers who need population data, Kalsbeek says. The Odum's focus also rests more heavily in the social sciences while the SRU mostly deals with health-related research.

In the last 18 years, the SRU has gathered information that has contributed to approximately 300 research projects, including studies to:

- understand adolescent dating behaviors
- find out how many adolescents have been given the HPV vaccine
- evaluate emergency room triage methodologies
- measure the prevalence of lower back pain
- increase the number of people in parts of North Carolina who eat at least five fruits and vegetables each day, and
- evaluate ways researchers can help reduce smoking among N.C. teens.

"We're always trying to find out what's going on with the population at large," Kalsbeek says.

The SRU uses telephone interviews as a primary mechanism to collect data. It maintains a regular staff of 10 but hires up to 60 temporary interviewers to collect information for various projects. It also conducts surveys online and via regular mail. ■

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Dr. William Kalsbeek