

Robert Inman, Professor of Finance, Economics, and Public Policy, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania.

To my mind there is no scarcity of important questions and no limit to the need for quality research of potential interest to city and state officials. What is scarce are good data and the time needed for careful analysis. It is on these margins that quality student research can make a valuable contribution. With no limit then to important questions: Go where the data are.

- Are there new programs adopted by the city or state in the past couple of years that had been oversubscribed and where information on applicants and chosen participants before and after participation will be available?
- Have there been “surprise” policy announcements that might be expected to have significant impacts on the private economy or on citizen utilization of government programs? This will mean talking with school officials, health department officials, community development officials, and staying in touch with the central issues of your city or state. Read the local newspaper!

Two examples from Philadelphia might be suggestive.

- First, we recently passed a sweetened beverage (“soda”) tax that no one expected would win approval. What has been the effect of the tax on soda consumption, particularly at neighborhood bodegas? By high school students? A well constructed survey could provide answers to these questions.
- Second, a private agency in Philadelphia runs a summer program connecting high school students in their freshman and sophomore years to firms for summer employment and associated counseling. The program is widely advertised and oversubscribed. What is the impact of the program on student drop-out rates, classroom performance, their selection of classes?

These are examples, and you get the idea. From our experience here at Penn, successful projects typically require a lead time of at least one semester and then one year for data collection and analysis. Start early.