

**Sustaining Illinois through Collaborative Governance:  
A Pilot Study of Water Systems Governance in Northeast and North Central Illinois**

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### **Abstract**

Fragmented governance—in which the scale of a policy problem cuts across the boundaries of multiple autonomous decision-making centers, such as cities, villages, and counties—is a chronic obstacle to sustainability. For example, ameliorating the degradation of a watershed, curbing air pollution in a commuter-shed through improved public transportation, and promoting regional economic development through jobs-housing co-location all require a coordinated response from hundreds of governments at multiple levels. To better understand the many forms of collaborative sustainability, we propose a pilot study of the governance of the water systems—including storm water, wastewater, and drinking water—in thirteen northeastern and north central Illinois counties. In it we see extensive and varying fragmentation: while the natural geography is defined by watersheds, the infrastructure used to manage it typically is owned and maintained by dozens if not hundreds of local government units. Specifically, we ask: How do local governments collaboratively govern water systems? What are the benefits to regional & local equity, economy, & environment from different forms of collaborative governance? What are the social, fiscal, political, and institutional determinants of the different forms of collaborative governance? Key deliverables include a Sustainable Governance GIS and a Governance Guidebook with in-depth case studies of collaborative governance.



coordinate management practices across hundreds of governments in and near the county, this problem will persist. Water systems also highlight the landscape of inequality common in metropolitan areas and other regions, in which communities are either “haves” or “have nots.” In the latter group—disproportionately communities of color—aging infrastructure and fiscal distress have limited the ability to respond to climate change and other systemic stressors, resulting in severe drinking water scarcity,<sup>3</sup> a dramatic increase in flooding, and sewage breaches that are harmful to both public health and workforce development.<sup>4</sup> By focusing on water systems governance, we address multiple sustainability elements: sustaining the water supply, promoting local and regional health, supporting a productive workforce, and addressing key issues for underserved populations.

The thirteen county study area is an ideal theoretical choice for research on collaborative governance. It exhibits high underlying fragmentation (see Figure 1). Its local governments are highly heterogeneous in their social, economic, political, and organizational attributes. And, lastly, preliminary evidence and extant research shows they are connected through a variety of cross-boundary activities, including a highly developed system of regional intergovernmental organizations, regional authorities, and shared drinking water services agreements.<sup>5</sup> These features—fragmentation, heterogeneity, and governance complexity—position our work to be analytically generalizable to other regions in Illinois, and across the United States. We also note that no study to date has comprehensively and holistically studied system governance by collecting and analyzing data on multiple cross-boundary mechanisms, and by doing so within a multi-county metropolitan region. Our team is well-positioned, through both institutional capacities and extensive embeddedness with the study area’s local governments, for realizing these ambitions.

Overall, sustainability challenges urge development of knowledge that can help communities understand and access the benefits of different forms of collaborative governance.<sup>6</sup> The policy-specific and region-specific pilot study we propose will allow us to stress-test our data collection and analysis efforts, ensure our measures are valid and reliable, and achieve deep engagement with decision-makers that can inform our research findings and dissemination. It will further goals that align strongly with the mission of sustaining Illinois, will generate findings that speak to many of the sustainability elements at the core of this funding opportunity, and will give us the essential data and insights we need to pursue external funding.

Answering these questions	will result in deliverables	that sustain communities by
How do local governments collaboratively govern water systems?	Governance geographic information system (GIS) <i>(data: intergov’tl agreements, meeting minutes, organization &amp; assoc. membership rosters)</i>	Supporting efforts of state leaders to incentivize collaborative sustainability, especially among those local gov’ts with limited resources.
What are the benefits to regional & local equity, economy, & environment from different forms of collaborative governance?		
What are the social, fiscal, political, and institutional determinants of the different forms of collaborative governance?	Governance guidebook with case studies in collaboration <i>(data: semi-structured interviews, focus groups at workshops)</i>	Promoting collaborative sustainability statewide to improve health, economy, & environmental outcomes.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.metroplanning.org/waterchallenges/Default.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cmap.illinois.gov/programs/water/stormwater>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.metroplanning.org/multimedia/publication/899>

<sup>6</sup> Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative governance in theory and practice. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(4), 543-571.

## Scope of work

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We will use IIN seed funding for (1) a governance geographic information system (Sustainable Governance GIS) of collaborative governance and (2) collaborative governance case studies (Sustainable Governance Guidebook) based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with key local and regional stakeholders.

The Sustainable Governance GIS will be developed as a geodatabase with local government and hydrologic unit polygons (see Figure 1) to which we link data on four cross-boundary mechanisms of collaborative governance:

- formal agreements among governments (e.g., local-local, state-local, etc.);
- membership in regional intergovernmental organizations (e.g., economic development districts, metropolitan planning organizations, councils of government);
- shared memberships in professional associations; and
- formation of multijurisdictional authorities.

Data sources include publicly available documents such as agreements, meeting minutes, and organizational membership rosters. These data are all susceptible to coding for inclusion in a geodatabase allowing extensive quantitative analysis (including network analysis) and visualization (including mapping). A Sustainable Governance GIS can serve as an informational resource for state leaders and the public.

The Sustainable Governance Guidebook will include case studies of different modes of collaborative governance based on what we identify during the GIS development. These case studies will rely on in-depth interviews (virtual and in-person) and surveys of local and regional decision-makers. The objective is to provide information about the motivation for specific forms of cross-boundary collaboration, the benefits that have been realized from these, and the barriers and opportunities that led to this choice. Another key source of data will be focus groups at two stakeholder workshops planned for Spring 2022. These workshops are designed both as data collection and dissemination tools.

Our expertise and capacity in governance research will ensure that we are successful in realizing broader impacts from IIN support by disseminating our work both within and beyond the study region. The collaboration between NIU and UIC public administration departments will anchor the work in the northeastern and north central metropolitan counties, where we have extensive connections already with local governments and regional governing bodies. Study findings and reports will be hosted on UIC's Networks and Governance Lab's website (<https://cuppa.uic.edu/net-gov-lab/>). We will also sustain future generations of leaders in Illinois by integrating undergraduates from traditionally underrepresented groups into our research.

Activity	Month	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Literature review													
Development of GIS base layers													
Data collection (four cross-boundary mechanisms)													
Network analysis and mapping													
Selection of case studies													
Data collection (interviews, surveys, meeting obs.)													
Dissemination													

## **Future work**

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This pilot project has the potential to be a proof of concept for larger funding opportunities. In particular, we intend to target two National Science Foundation programs: (i) Accountable Institutions and Behavior and (ii) Understanding the Rules of Life: Emergent Networks. Additionally, this research would be competitive for a U.S. Geological Survey and National Institutes for Water Resources grant to better understand governance mechanisms and the role of institutions in sustaining water supplies nationwide. This project could also support a proposal to the Illinois EPA Water Quality Management Planning Grant program and the national EPA Healthy Watersheds Consortium grant program. Findings from the research also directly translate to practice, and we intend to work with the International City/County Management Association to create a skill-building workshop that highlights the best practices of sustainable collaborative governance.

## Biographies

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**Thomas Skuzinski, Lead Researcher**, is an associate professor in the Department of Public Administration at Northern Illinois University. He holds both doctoral and master degrees in urban and regional planning from the University of Michigan and a Juris Doctor degree from Michigan State University College of Law. Prior to joining NIU, Professor Skuzinski was an assistant professor in the School of Public and International Affairs at Virginia Tech, where he also served as director of the Master of Urban and Regional Planning degree and associate director of education with the Virginia Center for Housing Research. His scholarship, which has been funded by the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Regional Studies Association, focuses on the use of cognitive nudges in the decision-making of local government leaders about land use planning and regulation.

**Kate Albrecht** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Public Administration in the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois-Chicago. Her research focuses on public organizations engaging in both formal and informal structures of collaborative governance. Her research has been published in the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, the *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs*, *Administration and Society*, and *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance*. Recent work on the nature of interlocal agreements that engage nonprofit organizations won a best paper award from the Theories, Intersections, and Boundaries Section of the Association for Research on Nonprofits and Voluntary Action.

**Chris Goodman** is an assistant professor of public administration at Northern Illinois University. His research focuses on local public finance, local governance, and intergovernmental affairs. His research has been published in *American Review of Public Administration*, the *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, and *Urban Affairs Review*.

**Michael Siciliano** is an Associate Professor of Public Administration and the co-director of the Networks and Governance Lab at the University of Illinois-Chicago. His research interests are interdisciplinary and center on the policymaking and administrative implications of human and inter-organizational networks. His work investigates the factors influencing network formation as well as the effect of social structure on individual and collective behavior, decision-making, and performance. Michael is currently associate editor of the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* and chair of the American Society for Public Administration's Section for Complexity and Network Studies.

**Jered B. Carr** is Professor and Head of the Department of Public Administration, and Co-Director of the Networks & Governance Lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His current research focuses on the formation and performance of urban governance networks, shared public services/joint ventures, and the risk perceptions of public officials considering intergovernmental collaborations. He has served as Co-Editor-in-Chief and Managing Editor of the *Urban Affairs Review* since 2014.

Category	Funding Request	Match Provided
<b>A. Personnel</b>		
Dr. Skuzinski 1 week summer salary	\$2,632.00	
Dr. Albrecht 1.5 week summer salary	\$3,591.00	
UIC Research Assistant: 10hr/week for SU2021	\$3,436.50	
NIU Research Assistant: 10hr/week for SP2022	\$3,476.25	
UIC Research Assistant: 10 hr/week for F2021 and SP2022		\$10,941.00
NIU Research Assistant: 10 hr/week for SU2021 and FA2021		\$5,793.75
NIU Four undergraduate researchers (100 hrs, \$18/hr)	\$7,200.00	
<b>B. Fringe Benefits</b>		
Dr. Albrecht (38.38%)	\$1,378.23	
Dr. Skuzinski (14.5%)	\$381.64	
UIC Research Assistant (11.96%)	\$411.01	
NIU Research Assistant	--	
NIU undergraduate researchers fringe (7.65%)	\$550.80	
<b>C. Travel</b>		
Workshop 1: North eastern IL (mileage, facility, and food)	\$450.00	
Workshop 2: North central IL (mileage, facility, and food)	\$450.00	
<b>D. Equipment</b>		
N/A	\$0	
<b>E. Supplies</b>		
Workshop facilitation - paper, markers, printing	\$800.00	
4 Microsoft Surface tablets for stakeholder engagement at workshops	\$4,000.00	
Transcription services for data collection recordings (\$1.25/min for approx. 500 mins)	\$675.00	
Transcription services for workshop recordings (\$1.25/min for approx. 400 minutes)	\$500.00	
<b>F. Other</b>		
<b>G. Total</b>	<b>\$29,932</b>	<b>\$16,735</b>