

EAGER: SAI Nudging Communities toward Broadband: Regional Public Sector Organizations as Rationalizing Intermediaries in Innovative Infrastructure Systems

Overview

Regional public sector organizations (RPSOs)--the multijurisdictional entities that include, e.g., economic development districts, regional planning commissions, metropolitan planning organizations, regional libraries, and intermediate school districts--are central to the function of infrastructure systems in the United States. They serve as a conduit for billions of dollars annually in federal and state intergovernmental resources, and can use their multijurisdictional scale and capacity to convene collaboration, share information and expertise, and coordinate policy adoption and implementation among the local governmental institutions (LGIs)--municipalities, individual public libraries, school districts, among others--that regularly make decisions that shape infrastructure outcomes. These RPSO functions can be critical for LGIs making decisions about innovative infrastructure amidst resource-scarcity and uncertainty.

This project investigates how two regions (in southwestern Virginia and northern Illinois) rely on RPSOs to overcome jurisdictional fragmentation at the local level and navigate functional fragmentation among the varied state and federal programs supporting deployment of broadband infrastructure and initiatives to improve rates of community adoption. The regions we selected are presently in the decision-making process or recently completed decision-making processes that permit us to measure the cultures, diplomatic strategies, and resources RPSOs use to work with constituent members. These regions also present an opportunity to understand how RPSOs work with higher levels of government to navigate the maze of funding options in this domain, including the FCC, USDA, Department of Education, HUD, and a plethora of state, private, and philanthropic opportunities. These findings will improve federal and state implementation strategies at the regional and local level and develop best practices for RPSOs who play an unsung role in stitching together regional responses.

Intellectual Merit

We conceptualize RPSOs as rationalizing intermediaries: organizations that can use collaboration, resource-sharing, and culture-building to nudge LGIs from a path dependence favoring the status quo over innovation. We fill multiple disciplinary gaps: in public administration, we take the newly developing behavioral perspective and apply it to rural infrastructure; in library science, our work takes a more holistic approach viewing libraries and library systems as collaborative institutions integral to promoting widespread adoption; for education scholars, our work will highlight the underexplored intermediating role for ESAs in rural areas.

Broader Impacts

We will impact three groups: (1) students traditionally underrepresented in the academy, especially in the areas supported by SBE and EHR; (2) rural households and communities; and (3) policy-makers at the state, regional, and local levels. We support underrepresented students via mentored summer labs in our study areas. We study an infrastructure system critical to the present and future well-being of the more than 20 million Americans living in digital deserts. We will disseminate our findings to state and regional stakeholders and more broadly through our connections to associations of RPSOs and LGIs (NARC, NADO, NASB, ALA, and the State Broadband Leaders Network), in addition to academic audiences via journals and conferences.