

Research Crosses Virtual Borders: No Passport Required

By Charles Spencer
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Derrick Cogburn is on the move.

Sitting in his office in the SIS Building, getting ready to travel to New York and then to Abu Dhabi and Bangkok on research grant-related trips, he fits in time between meetings to talk about his work.

During his career, Cogburn has won \$15.3 million in grants. And this week Cogburn, an associate professor in the School of International Service and director of the Center for Research on Collaboratories and Technology Enhanced Learning Communities, or Cotelco, is expecting an important visitor to campus regarding a new grant. The executive director of the Nippon Foundation, a Tokyo-based philanthropic organization, will travel to AU to review a draft of Cogburn's grant proposal for a project related to establishing the Institute for Disability and Public Policy in Thailand.

The project is a perfect fit for the center's expertise in transforming cyber connectivity into collaborative relationships that solve problems and benefit people and organizations. The center is now in the second phase of another Nippon grant for the project.

That grant resulted from a focus group Cogburn attended in Bangkok to find ways to address a problem in Southeast Asia: the region has one of the world's highest levels of disability, yet it often stigmatizes disabled people and offers them little social support. The focus group came up with three ways to fight the problem:

- A virtual graduate institute to produce a cadre of leaders with master's degrees in public policy and disability issues
- A cyberinfrastructure to allow people to participate in a virtual graduate institute no matter where they live

- A curriculum that could draw on experts from anywhere in the world

Cogburn's membership in that focus group led to his being in position to win grants to support the plan.

"I think a couple of things have helped us to be successful," Cogburn said of his and the center's track record in landing grants. "One is our approach to collaboration, that collaboration and synergy and integration kind of run in our blood. I've learned an awful lot from some really good people about how to manage large-scale, multi-institutional collaborative projects where you've got lots of faculty members and their own interests and goals."

Cogburn walks the talk in his own life, too.

Recruited by AU from Syracuse University in 2009, Cogburn now has a joint appointment between the two universities, and Cotelco is a joint social science research center in AU's School of International Service and Syracuse's School of Information Studies. The center is also affiliated with the Burton Blatt Institute: Centers of Innovation on Disability, at Syracuse.

Cogburn travels monthly to Syracuse, but most business connecting colleagues, students, and staff at both universities is done virtually.

"This is where we're going, and I think part of what has happened is that I'm on the cusp, I'm on the cutting edge," Cogburn says. "We have to work out these issues of how do you do this. How can you collaborate more deeply with colleagues at other campuses? How can a faculty member move between two campuses? These are things I think the academy is going to have to wrestle with."

Recent Cogburn Grants

Virtual Organizations as Sociotechnical Systems (VOSS)

A three-year National Science Foundation (NSF) grant of about \$200,000, VOSS is up for renewal next month. Collaborating with Northern Illinois University, which was subcontracted for part of the project, Cogburn and his collaborators constructed a model of virtual organizations and tested it against a body of 1,000 published interdisciplinary articles on virtual organizations.

Cyberinfrastructure Facilitator

This two-year NSF grant of about \$200,000 addresses a basic problem related to the adoption of collaboratories: scientists, economists, and other researchers are subject matter experts, not experts in virtual collaboration or databases. The proposal: create a curriculum giving students the skills they need to be cyberinfrastructure facilitators. Five students received such training and were placed in National Institutes of Health labs around the country to get further feedback on the kinds of skills necessary to perform the job. The finding: two kinds of qualifications were essential for this position—technical skills, such as database development and management, and cross-cultural collaboration skills.

Transnational NGOs as Agents of Change

This approximately \$500,000 NSF-funded project argued that NGOs play an increasingly important role in world affairs. Researchers collected baseline data on 180 NGOs on issues such as structure, organization, leadership, partnership, and use of technology. The study resulted in what Cogburn said is considered the best existing quantitative data set on transnational NGOs.

Tips on Landing Grants

Derrick Cogburn offers this advice on landing research grants:

- Pursue only projects you truly care about, not merely those that you can credibly make a case for winning grants to support. Make sure the project is worth the long hours it will take to assemble a proposal and a team.
- Particularly for projects involving NSF, talk with your program officer and discuss your project with him or her.
- Volunteer to serve on an NSF review panel. The work may seem unrewarding, but it gives you an invaluable perspective on the behind-the-scenes debates, during which you will learn which kinds of proposals are winners and which are not.

Source: <http://www.american.edu/ameriantoday/campus-news/20101214-derrick-cogburn-research.cfm>