



Carolina Population Center

In 1966, the Carolina Population Center was founded at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. To celebrate its 40th anniversary in 2006, a project was conducted to document the history of the Center. This transcript is an excerpt from an oral history interview.

Interviewee: Ronald R. Rindfuss

Interview conducted by: Grace Camblos

Interview dates: October 26, 2005 and November 30, 2005

Ronald R. Rindfuss was CPC Director from 1992 – 1997, and has been a CPC Fellow since 1977.

RR: The Center has been very effective at promoting interdisciplinary research. And that mirrors what's been happening within the field. And indeed, we've been a leader in the field. And we've been effective partly because people would know one another from different disciplines. And they'd interact, they'd talk about what they were doing, and so forth. That was easier when we were a bit smaller. It now gets more difficult, and people have to work harder to make sure that we continue with that cross-fertilization that comes with interdisciplinary research, and multidisciplinary research.

One of the things that sets our Center apart from most of the others around the country is the range of faculty from different departments across campus that are involved.

GC: What's the value of having that interdisciplinary aspect?

RR: It does a number of things. One thing it does is it exposes researchers to ideas and techniques that have been developed in other fields. If you look at the history of science, a lot of times, breakthroughs in one science come when researchers in that science realize that in another field, something's been developed, whether it's a theory, a data set, or a technique. And they say, "Hey! You know that's - we could use that!" There are lots of examples. And so our researchers and our graduate students are exposed to a lot of things, not only in their own discipline, but in neighboring disciplines. And so we can do things, a lot of times, that we would not have been able to do otherwise.

GC: Like what?

RR: Well, you can ask in a while about the geographic Spatial Analysis Unit here. But by collaborating with Steve Walsh in Geography, I'm using satellite data. If you had asked me 30 years ago whether I'd ever be using satellite data, I would've said, "You're daft! What are you talking about?" And I'm using satellite data and various aspects of geographic information

systems to answer real questions that I care about. Some work with David Guilkey. David Guilkey is an econometrician. And working with him, I'm able to answer some questions, use some techniques that I never would've been able to do.