

Networking and Idea Development Workshop

1. Call to Action

Building community resilience is a complex challenge, with no ‘one-size fits all’ solution. *We need multi-stakeholder projects that examine community resilience in new and interesting ways and, in doing so, create a fuller picture of what works and what doesn’t (and for whom) in resilience-building policies and programs.*

The GRP’s Thriving Communities-5 Request for Applications (RFA) is an opportunity to expand our understanding of what resilience means in different communities and contexts. Helping communities thrive means working together and sharing ideas. Researchers must work closely with residents, with other experts outside their fields, and with those responsible for developing policies and programs. This can be hard work, but we expect to see this level of engagement in all proposals. We also hope to see applicants develop new and effective ways of bridging perspectives of researchers, communities, and practitioners.

There is a growing movement to do the kinds of research-to-action projects called for in the RFA, but these projects are still unusual and difficult, both conceptually and operationally. As a starting point for workshop discussions, this document shares observations from the mentors about key challenges for these projects and some strategies for overcoming these challenges. We hope that some of these ideas will spark discussions that will lead to new ways of framing research questions and developing the integrative teams needed to address them. Each of you, as a workshop participant, has perspectives, expertise, and life experiences that can contribute to a broader and shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities for enhancing coastal community resilience.

An Important Note: What is In and Out of Bounds for the RFA? The RFA broadly defines resilience as the ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from and more successfully adapt to stressors, but there are many other definitions for resilience and you should use the one that best fits your team and project. Regardless of how you conceive of this concept, however, we want proposals that focus on the “human” aspects of resilient communities. Topics that are “out of bounds” are those that focus on infrastructure. For example:

- A project focused on how to design or build housing that is more resilient to hurricanes is out of bounds, but finding ways to design housing resilience related policies and resources to serve the most vulnerable would be an appropriate topic.
- A project focused on the biophysical aspects of coastal erosion would be out of bounds, but projects that look at the differential effects of erosion on coastal populations and livelihoods, and how communities organize to address these issues would be an appropriate topic.

2. Defining the Problem

What is the essence of the problem this RFA seeks to address?

The RFA seeks to increase the resilience of Gulf individuals, households, and communities in the face of many stressors – including those that are environmental, economic, social, psychological, or health-related. Although people often use ‘resilience’ to describe how well a community recovers from major, one-time disasters such as hurricanes, this RFA encourages applicants to also think about chronic stressors. These could include long-lasting or frequently reoccurring stressors, such as environmental degradation, social and health disparities, or economic pressures on the major, regional industries that in turn affect Gulf region jobs and livelihoods.

What is the history of the problem in the Gulf region? How big is the problem; what are the trends?

The Gulf region has a long history of social, economic, and environmental change. People are used to being resilient and in taking pride for their ability to survive hardship. But recent stressors are of an order of magnitude beyond what the region is accustomed to handle. These include shifts in the region’s major economic drivers such as oil and gas operations and industries that depend upon environmental resources, such as seafood and tourism. The frequency and intensity of stressors on the region are also increasing due to climate change and globalization, and this is altering how people earn a living and where they live. All of these trends intensify the need to understand and support communities as they seek new ways to continue their traditions of resilience.

The stakes are significant: The Gulf region has a wealth of natural resources, cultural diversity, and critical economic hubs. Communities in the region have been sources of significant innovation and culturally unique strategies and responses to challenges. At the same time the region also has high rates of income inequality, long standing environmental and social challenges, which include efforts to grapple with the region's history of racial inequality. Efforts to promote resilience must be customized to account for these conditions not as abstractions, but as factors that shape the daily lives of residents in specific communities.

Everyone in this room understands pieces of the problem. We need to share what we know so that we can work from a broader and deeper understanding of the challenges we face. Here are some pieces of the problem, to get us started:

- Louisiana's "working coast" is dotted with communities that may not outlast the people who currently live there. A fourth of the state's wetlands are gone and state planners believe at least another 2000 square miles could be lost in the next 50 years. Such environmental change has impacts that extend beyond the shoreline. "The coastal zone, stretching west from Breton Sound across the mouth of the Mississippi to Sabine Pass, contains 37 percent of the estuarine marsh and the [largest commercial fishery](#) in the contiguous 48 states. Its ports support [24 percent of the nation's waterborne commerce](#) and a fifth of its oil supply. The coast provides winter habitat for five million migratory waterfowl. Along with man-made levees and flood walls, it is the buffer that keeps the Gulf of Mexico from draining into New Orleans, much of which sits below sea level"¹.
- The Loyola University publishes the JustSouth Index² each year to measure progress made and ground lost on issues of social justice in the US. The index examines three dimensions of social justice: poverty, racial disparity, and immigrant exclusion. The 5 Gulf states are among the worst performing states in the poverty dimension; Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama rank

¹ New York Times. Feb 24, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/24/us/jean-lafitte-floodwaters.html>

² Jesuit Social Research Institute, Loyola University New Orleans. 2017. Just South Index 2017. http://www.loyno.edu/jsri/sites/loyno.edu.jsri/files/JustSouth_Index_2017.pdf

near the bottom in the racial disparity dimension; Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama rank poorly in the immigrant exclusion dimension.

- In studies that have tracked the recovery of distinct but adjacent communities in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, researchers found that even families of similar economic means and whose homes had sustained similar levels of damage often have very different experiences with recovery – “almost as if they had suffered two different events”. Historical, social, and cultural factors may help to explain different paths of survivors³.

Our challenge is to develop a shared understanding of the many aspects of resilience and develop project ideas that can advance this understanding in new and important ways. We need you to expand upon these examples of ***stressors and strengths*** by sharing your ideas about what makes some communities more or less resilient than others. What do you see as major stressors on environmental, social, and economic systems in the Gulf region? What are the linkages between and among some of these stressors? What examples of resilient communities can you share? We expect that hearing the diverse perspectives in the room will stimulate your thinking about new and important ways to examine and enhance community resilience.

3. Challenges and Opportunities that Can Be Explored Through this RFA

What’s been tried and how well is that working? What new approaches and ideas are needed?

Making better connections between ‘resilience research’ and the lived experiences and practical needs of communities will create a fuller picture of what works and what doesn’t when it comes to enhancing resilience. Research-to-action projects, such as those we are calling for in this RFA, are essential. But doing the work involves addressing substantial challenges.

³ Servick, K, Science. More than 12 years after Hurricane Katrina, scientists are learning what makes some survivors more resilient than others. February 27, 2018. <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2018/02/more-12-years-after-hurricane-katrina-scientists-are-learning-what-makes-some-survivors>

Much work has been done to understand external drivers, such as climate change, economic trends, and demographic shifts. But we still struggle to understand significant ‘internal’ drivers, including those that are cognitive (mindsets, expectations, and perceptions), political, or institutional in nature; and influenced by life experiences and the environments in which people live. Understanding both external and internal drivers is essential for improving research and practice of resilience.

As this discussion illustrates, enhancing resilience in the face of multiple stressors is a wicked problem that requires ingenuity and creative thinking. The problems and solutions are characterized by high **uncertainty**, insufficient data, **conflicting perspectives** on what is “true’ or “right”, potentially significant **tradeoffs**, and a high probability that whatever we do today may not be the right **intervention** tomorrow.

The advantage of naming a wicked problem is that it clarifies the strategies we must use. To solve wicked problems, we can’t stay in our comfort zones and do research or business as usual. Instead, we must bring together multiple perspectives, disciplines, and methods.

From the limited work that has been done, we know that some of the biggest challenges in research-to-action projects are:

- Ensuring that there are authentic community voices and practitioner-grounded perspectives incorporated into the research and policy design.
- Overcoming the conventional ways in which researchers seek to understand the underlying drivers of community resilience.
- Forming functional teams and partnerships needed to develop true collaborations (between researchers and coastal residents and policy makers) and implement effective resilience-building practices.

We also know that finding ways to address these challenges can lead to new and important research questions. The resulting projects have more traction in communities and greater potential for delivering benefits to communities. During the workshop, we’ll focus on three overlapping strategies identified by the mentors that can help to minimize these challenges:

Strategy 1: Engaging communities in ways that make stronger links between research questions and community knowledge and experience. There are many ways to do this, including Community Based Participatory Research models that emphasize collaboration between researcher and community residents at all phases of the research process. The benefits of this strategy are clear: when communities are part of the project, rather than simply a part of the research pool, the community gains ownership and has a higher likelihood of continuing to strengthen the community after the project ends.

Consider different partnership models, and how a project can embrace the wisdom of community members and ensure that projects are “culturally responsive” in that they consider and reflect the different cultural backgrounds of the people you engage and offer services to. Another key consideration is how to identify and engage legitimate community leaders, which is often not straight forward. Researchers often default to local elected officials or representatives of organization they recognize, and miss leaders with a much deeper reach into the community and more local knowledge.

Strategy 2: Considering issues of equity in the development of project ideas and outcomes, including how a project could help transform policies and practices that sustain social, economic, or health inequities. In America today, inequity plays out in a variety of ways, including life expectancy differences, exposure to environmental risks, access to housing and employment, education gaps, structural racism and discriminatory practices. Systemic discrimination divides communities and inhibits many from achieving their full potential; the impact of economic and social inequity can endure across generations. These inequities have implications for resilience research, policy, and practice. As you develop project ideas, consider the questions of: Resilience for whom? To what? Where? And to what ends?

Consider how projects can help address issues of social, health, and environmental equity; and how to address potential tradeoffs between working towards the resilience of whole systems (such as cities or coastal economies) vs. enhancing the resilience of particular sectors, populations, places.

Strategy 3: Supporting integration of perspectives, tools, and approaches from different disciplines and across the research-practice divide. This strategy is relevant to both the development of research

questions and the composition and approach of a project team. Currently, resilience is approached by different disciplines in different ways. A challenge for this RFA is to synthesize the best from each of these perspectives. An integrative approach to defining the research questions should explore different perspectives on what angle to take, what issues are pertinent, and what and whose knowledge is relevant.

Such collaboration can be difficult even within relatively homogenous groups. When participants come from different cultural contexts and widely different professions and perspectives, collaboration is even more difficult. Ensuring that all adhere to respectful and community-engaged collaborative practice takes focus, good communication, and hard work. There are often few institutional incentives (particularly in academic intuitions) for interdisciplinary work or community partnered research, although this is changing in many institutions.

Consider how to:

- Work synthetically and creatively across disciplinary and researcher- practitioner divides.
- Identify and organize the right team of people to take on the challenges and ensure that each partner is contributing what they are good at and what they are excited about and valued equally in the discourse.
- Bring together top-down and bottom-up approaches, or quantitative and qualitative methodologies to develop a more robust understanding.

4. Starting Point for the Discussion

We know that these projects are difficult to do well; they can be risky and require courage and determination. However, there are many examples of successes that we can draw upon to guide our work. We look forward to sharing and hearing from you about your experiences and to working together in this workshop to develop new, and interesting ways to examine and enhance the resilience of coastal communities in the Gulf region.