NIU’s Center for Governmental Studies: Evolving with the Engagement Mission of the American University
The Center for Governmental Studies (CGS) has played an integral role in fulfilling Northern Illinois University’s (NIU’s) outreach and engagement mission for 50 years. A major factor in this longevity is CGS remaining relevant despite recent seismic changes in the role of American universities.

Two turbulent decades in particular created new pressures for higher education. Social unrest of the 1960s fueled by the unpopular Vietnam War gave rise to campus protests and sit-ins across the nation and highlighted the need for improved town-gown relationships. High inflation and wage and price spirals followed in the 1970s, requiring higher education to make difficult program cuts to remain competitive.

CGS was founded in 1969 at the confluence of those two tumultuous decades. Since its beginning, CGS has helped address significant economic and societal problems by providing public service, applied research and technical assistance, and capacity development primarily for local government and other public sector and non-profit organizations.

**Founding through the 1970s**

CGS was authorized by the Illinois Board of Higher Education in September 1969 under the leadership of Political Science Professor Daniel Wit. Dr. James Banovetz served as the founding director. During its first 10 years, CGS emphasized capacity development of local governments and applied research/technical assistance, both of which remain core CGS practice areas. Early projects included involvement in the process leading to the adoption of the 1970 Illinois Constitution, modernizing Rockford city government, and working with other local governments and regional mental health agencies.

CGS also coordinated the MPA Program and developed its local government internship component. In addition to Jim Banovetz, John Rehfuss and Robert Agranoff served as directors during this period, all tenured professors in NIU’s Department of Political Science.
In the 1970s, CGS began managing the Illinois City/County Management Association (ILCMA). NIU's involvement in ILCMA programming and creation of the secretariat created invaluable opportunities for internships with city managers and administrators. This 45-year partnership was the first of its kind in the nation and is the longest continuous contract for CGS. ILCMA is an important source of support for professional local government in Illinois and a core element of CGS. Another long-lasting project that began during this period was the Census Data Lab developed by future CGS director Pete Trott.

In 1979, while CGS was an integral part of the new Division of Public Administration, it also became a semi-autonomous unit within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. CGS was encouraged to become more interdisciplinary and to broaden its clientele and funding base.

**The 1980s**

In the 1980s, the federal government was encouraging higher education to help solve economic problems by forming business relationships with the private sector. While CGS was not directly involved in patent research or technology transfer, it was exploring a new role for universities: economic development. Under director Doug Dobson, in 1982 CGS relocated from a pair of residential buildings on campus to the Monat Building, a university-owned hotel redeveloped as an office building in downtown DeKalb.

NIU President William Monat, for whom the building is named, decided that CGS should take the lead in being the university's voice on economic development, a policy area gaining in importance. Over that decade, CGS supported economic development activities in northern Illinois. CGS also represented the university on regional economic development groups forming in Rockford and along the I-90 and I-88 corridors. The *Illinois Policy Survey* was also launched during this period to raise the profile of CGS and NIU with the state legislature and continued for 28 years.

**The 1990s**

As state and federal support of higher education began to decrease, national educational leadership called for more diverse roles for universities and stronger linkages between the campus and societal problems. Pete Trott, the first non-political scientist to head CGS, continued to emphasize economic development and initiated programs in economic development and community development. Data and mapping services were also expanded.
The 2000s

A seminal report on higher education issued by the Kellogg Foundation in 1999 introduced the idea of "the engaged institution" that called for universities to form two-way interactions of mutual benefit. This partnership model was a radical shift from the model of university as ivory tower. In 2002, consistent with the national focus on the public purposes of public higher education, NIU established what became the Division of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development with CGS as a central and critical component, under the leadership of then director Robert Gleeson. In 2004, CGS created the Civic Leadership Academy to address the training needs of governmental and civic leaders in the region.

The 2010s

CGS continued to forge alliances with external partners and across campus. This included international partners, such as the PASCAL International Observatory focused on sustainable regional development strategies and NIU’s newly formed School for Public and Global Affairs. An innovative convening that brings private sector economic views to governmental leaders, the *Illinois Financial Forecast Forum: Private Sector Views that Will Impact the Public Sector*, was initiated in 2010. The forum, a CGS partnership with ILCMA and the Illinois Government Finance Officers Association, has been enthusiastically received since its inception.

Seven CGS practice areas are under the purview of current CGS director Diana Robinson:

- Association Management
- Community and Economic Development
- Data Visualization
- Informatics
- Public Management and Training
- Survey Research
- Workforce Development

For 50 years it has been our mission to build stronger regions by providing expertise that helps decision-makers implement efficient, sustainable, and cost-effective approaches to economic, social, and information management issues. We look forward to continuing our collaboration with CGS partners to find new and innovative ways to support this mission.

*Main contributors to this history include Jim Banovetz, Bob Gleeson and Carol Zar. Others who provided valuable input are Anne Kaplan, Kurt Thurmaier, Dawn Peters, Greg Kuhn, Mel Henriksen, Kathy Siebrasse and Diana Robinson. For more information about NIU’s Center for Governmental Studies, visit [www.cgs.niu.edu](http://www.cgs.niu.edu).*