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Elizabeth DeBray-Pelot, an assistant professor in the department of lifelong education, administration, and policy, is interim director of EPEC; Dorothy Harnish, an associate research scientist in the Occupational Research Group, is assistant director for evaluation for EPEC; and Arthur (Andy) Horne, interim dean of the College of Education, is a Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus and founding director of EPEC. UGA photo by Peter Frey.

- Front Entrance to Aderhold Hall to Get New Plaza, Sidewalks

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## College's New Education Policy Center Works to Improve Georgia Public Schools

*Founded in the fall of 2006, UGA's Education Policy and Evaluation Center (EPEC) aims to provide the latest research on best educational practices to help Georgia policymakers improve the state's public schools. We recently sat down with the center's founders and directors to get the latest update on their work.*

Julie Sartor, BSED, '00 | Jan 17, 2008



**What is the mission of the Education Policy and Evaluation Center?**

**Harnish:** To support research on policy and evaluation to improve education. I provide evaluation expertise that can be used to improve education interventions and policy decisions about programming or resource allocation. We work with local schools, districts, state education offices, national and international groups that need to evaluate their educational programs or would like to know more about program evaluation. We develop an evaluation plan based on their needs and the questions they want to answer.

**DeBray-Pelot:** The policy research group provides independent analysis of a variety of K-12 education issues so policy makers have information on best policies and practices. We are developing a comprehensive research agenda that will focus not just on Georgia, but the entire Southeast. We are hoping to study school finance, state and federal accountability policies, and student assignment policies. We are trying to develop relationships with external constituencies, various actors throughout state and local government, superintendents, and legislators.

**Horne:** In the College of Education, one of the largest colleges in the country, a lot of people do policy work already. There are also people who do program evaluation. The center was created to pull together this diverse group of people doing the same work.

**What services are offered to faculty and beyond the COE, UGA?**

**Harnish:** We are oriented toward external clients, so we would begin by identifying partners in education or in the community who have evaluation needs, or who are asking us to work with them on funded projects. Once we understand what they want us to look at, we then go internal to the COE and find the faculty members who have expertise and interest in those areas, and we might bring them on as co-PIs on evaluation projects. An example is Reading First where we are the external evaluators in Georgia, but are working with several faculty (as co-PI) and grad students (as field observers) in the language and literacy education department.

**DeBray-Pelot:** These things are also true on the policy side. We provide the linkage Dottie described between external clients and constituents and the expertise of faculty.

**What is the center's role at UGA?**

**DeBray-Pelot:** The center is hoping to play a convening or hub role across the university. There are a variety of people across the university working on education policy from the Carl Vinson Institute to the Institute of Higher Education. We try to provide focus for this variety of projects. We are planning a conference on school finance, which will be largely internal in the college, but we're hoping to invite participation by faculty in the IHE, CVI, and the School of Public and International Affairs.

**Harnish:** We're also trying to find international partners.

**Horne:** We see this as an opportunity for collaboration within the college and other groups on campus, including the Institute for Behavioral Research and other policy organizations. Further, we anticipate

being in collaborative roles with education systems and state offices, to provide the best possible information on research and implementation of educational policy and evaluation.

**DeBray-Pelot:** It's interesting to look at the variety of institutions involved in the policy process in the state. There aren't a lot of independent think-tank agencies or institutions. We'll be counted on to provide independent analysis in the education field. There are certain institutes that work with budget policy, priorities, public policy issues, but not specifically on education. I think that over time we'll fill a special niche.

#### **What impact do you hope to have?**

**Horne:** It's important that a lot of decisions are based on ideology or beliefs or anecdotes. We are trying to bring research and evaluation background to decision-making. We anticipate influencing political/legislative decisions and also business/industrial decisions as people say, "How do we support education?" It's sometimes good to have a science behind it as opposed to just a wish. We hope to do that at least at the state level and, as Elizabeth said, perhaps the Southeast. We have a map of the world up above. We intend some day to be all over the world.

**Harnish:** There's so much federal money that goes to all the states for various program initiatives to do all sorts of school reform, meeting the needs of diverse students, and most of those have a requirement for an external evaluator to determine for the school and funding agency, "Are they making good use of the funding and what are the results?" Our role is to be able to systematically and as objectively as possible collect the kind of information that can answer that question. The actual evaluation design, data collection and analysis will depend on the circumstances of the school or project. What information do we have to help improve the initiative? To decide if it should be discontinued, continued, or expanded? Those are the kind of decisions based on the information about the way the program is implemented, and the results or outcomes achieved. In this age of test scores and accountability, we have to include student achievement outcomes in the evaluations of learning improvement.

#### **What is the vision of the EPEC?**

**Horne:** Jean Bowen, [interim grants development specialist], has coined an expression we're using: "2020 Vision." In 2020, what will we have accomplished? Part of it is to be, as Elizabeth mentioned, a think tank, bringing people's thoughts and efforts together to be more effective. A lot of academics, myself included, write professional articles that go into little-read academic journals. We want to take the knowledge that's created in the college and the university and share that throughout the state with educators, legislative and business leaders as a way of saying, "We really do know a lot about what works in education." Sometimes the amount of information and research is overwhelming. Our goal is to synthesize the research on educational policy and evaluation and present it to decision makers in a concise and usable fashion.

**DeBray-Pelot:** We hope to have a demonstrable effect on the way education policy and legislation are crafted.

**Harnish:** As evaluators observing school changes and collecting data about what is working (or not), we have a great deal of expertise and knowledge that can be useful to educators and decision makers.

**DeBray-Pelot:** A lot of universities will have policy centers by 2020, but our state right now is a natural laboratory for conditions that are on the cusp of trends that will affect schools nationally: rapid growth in immigration, economic inequality, instruction for limited English proficient students, and increased demand for high-quality pre-school programs.

**Horne:** We have had good support to get started. The center is very fortunate to have two associate directors who bring great expertise to the field, so we're way ahead of a lot of places who are starting out.

**What does the future hold for the EPEC?**

**Horne:** We're looking at ways of supporting policy and evaluation components, both programmatically and economically. That includes making sure the work we're doing is relevant to the people in the college and relevant to the state. That's one of the reasons we're putting out a newsletter, sending information to superintendents to say, "Here's who we are and what we're doing. Let us know what would be helpful to you," so it will be an interactive process. Hopefully, people will see us as a valuable resource... a reservoir of knowledge. Across the country, more and more people are insisting upon collaborative, interdisciplinary approaches to solving problems. That's what we're interested in. We're not saying about the task groups, "Is there someone in a department who can handle a project?" But rather throughout the college, "Who is interested in this common theme?" Our goal is to bring people from diverse backgrounds together on a common task so that we can have a product that is interdisciplinary.

**Harnish:** We have a staff of research professionals who have expertise in areas of online surveys, focus groups and individual interviews, onsite school observation visits, developing protocol for data collection and analysis, and use of both quantitative and qualitative methodology. The Program Evaluation Group has a history of diverse research skills and expertise that can be used to support studies. That's a valuable resource we offer, as well as the ability to connect that with faculty and content-area expertise from throughout the College of Education or elsewhere in the university.

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**Julie Sartor is an editor in the COE's Office of Communications and Publications.**

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