

MEASURING QUALITY

TRB Releases New Report

NAN HUMPHREY

The Transportation Research Board has released a new report entitled *Measuring Quality: A Review Process for the University Transportation Centers Program*. The study, which was funded by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), reflects the year-long work of a panel of experts appointed by the National Research Council and chaired by James I. Taylor, Associate Dean of the College of Engineering at the University of Notre Dame. The primary task of the committee, the third that has been convened to provide guidance to DOT on the University Transportation Centers (UTC) Program, was to develop a formal evaluation process for examining the quality of the programs and products of individual centers established under the UTC Program.

Background

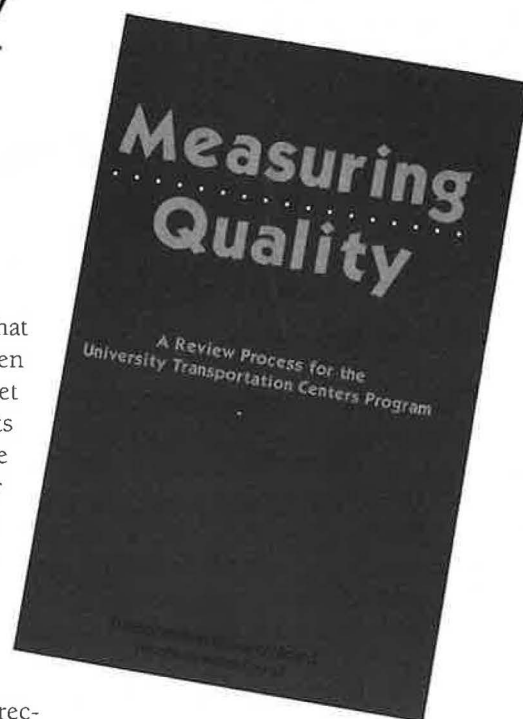
Congressional legislation authorizing the UTC Program in 1987 identified ambitious goals. Concentration of resources in university centers and sustained support were expected to create a national and regional resource for conducting research on surface transportation issues and educating the transportation professionals of the future beyond that which could be achieved through the more traditional approach of funding individual research and course development projects. Now that the program has entered its sixth year and more than \$85 million in federal, state, and local funds has been provided to the centers, it is fair to ask whether these goals are being realized.

Nan Humphrey is Senior Program Officer, TRB.

The study committee recognized that the structure of the program has often made it difficult for centers to meet program goals. Matching requirements and multiple sponsorship (centers are required to match federal funds dollar for dollar from local sources), university consortia arrangements, and requirements for regional representation (one center in each federal region) have complicated oversight arrangements and goal setting. In addition, program priorities and directives to the centers as defined by DOT have evolved and changed over the life of the program; thus, there is no long history of shared expectations about program outcomes.

Guidelines

In light of these program characteristics, the committee offered the following guidance to those designing the review process. First, a period of stability and continuity is essential to the success of the program; thus, a new evaluation process should not result in fundamental changes in federal program direction at this time. The diversity of centers, with their multiple sponsors and funding sources, and their differing capabilities to meet program goals, must be recognized in developing appropriate review procedures. Moreover, the process should acknowledge that the excellence of center programs and products cannot be measured and compared in uniform, objective terms because of the diversity of centers, the differing priorities of program sponsors, and the very nature of research and educational programs. Finally, federal oversight and reporting requirements should reflect



Measuring Quality: A Review Process for the University Transportation Centers Program is available from the Transportation Research Board, Box 289, Washington, D.C. 20055 (telephone 202-334-3213 or 3214).

DOT's shared oversight role and avoid the imposition of multiple administrative burdens on the centers.

Recommendations

Within this broad guidance, the following evaluation process was recommended:

1. A comprehensive review process should be conducted at three levels: program, center, and project. (The committee's primary focus, however, was on the center-level review as DOT had requested.)
2. The primary objective of the center's evaluation should be to assess the excellence of individual center programs and products and also the extent to which the expected value added from funding centers is being realized.
3. Individual centers should be evalu-

ated against the objectives and achievement measures identified in their annual plans and mutually agreed to by DOT and individual centers through the current annual strategic planning process—a sensible approach for handling the issue of center differences.

4. Measuring excellence requires qualitative subjective assessments, which can best be handled by a peer review team through a site visit.

5. Composition of the team is critical, and a three- to four-person team composed of academics, transportation professionals, and users was recommended.

6. Peer reviews should be conducted on a three-year cycle, corresponding with the current three-year center grant cycle, to provide adequate time for centers to develop programs, show results, and help minimize the administrative burden on the centers. Reviews should be conducted more frequently for centers that receive poor evaluations, and the first peer reviews should be scheduled as soon as possible because there have been no systematic external reviews of individual centers since the inception of the program.

7. DOT should determine what role evaluations should play in center funding decisions. Ideally, center performance reviews and funding should be linked. However, the primary goal of the review process should be long term—to provide feedback to centers and DOT on the quality of center programs and opportunities for their improvement.

Native American Transportation *continued from page 23*

9. Tribes, states, and BIA should jointly improve the process for the certification of Indian Employment Preference and for the rights of Tribal Employment Rights Offices.

10. BIA and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration should give more emphasis to Indian transportation safety, to work with tribes to develop tribal highway safety plans, and to help with applications for highway safety funds.

11. Tribes should be made more aware of Title 23, Section 18, and 16b funds that are available for rural public transportation and aid to the physically disadvantaged. Tribes also need help on how to work with the states and the Federal Transit Administration in applying for grants.

12. Federal and state transportation agencies should include Native Americans at the earliest stages of transportation planning. Impacts on Indian archeology or sacred sites may be involved. These are important concerns of Native Americans and are best served by cooperative agreement instead of litigation.

13. The transportation problems of

Native American tribes that do not have defined reservations require that transportation programs should not be limited to highways only, but should include airports and air service, water transportation, and trails used by the native peoples.

Future Activities

As part of the conference, material was prepared to assist Indian tribes in creating an organization similar to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. Under the leadership of Wendell George of the Colville Nation and Skip Curry of the Navajo Nation, an Intertribal Transportation Association is being organized.

TRB will continue to assist with networking among those who participated in the conference through regular TRB committee activity and by working with the new Indian LTAP Centers. TRB has also scheduled follow-up activities, including the activation of a Subcommittee on Native American Transportation Issues and a program at the 73rd TRB Annual Meeting on Indian Transportation Issues.

Author's Correction

In the article, "Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990," by Rosalyn Simon published in the September–October 1993 issue of *TR News*, the effective date of January 26, 1995, given in Table 2 for the requirement for detectable warnings on rail platforms, should have been listed as a proposed date. Final Department of Transportation regulations published on November 30, 1993, established July 26, 1994, as the required completion date for the installation of detectable warnings in existing key stations.