In Texas, Education Research Centers (ERCs) offer researchers access to the state's education and employment data that span nearly 30 years. Located at three universities across the state, ERCs provide researchers with individual-level longitudinal data. Researchers can use the data to explore questions about the state's education system and outcomes and to inform education and workforce policy.

Researchers' projects benefit from the data and support ERCs provide, resulting in a large body of research offering insight into a wide range of policy topics.

Establishing the ERCs

In 2006, the Texas Legislature passed a bill to create three ERCs housed at public higher education institutions in Texas. The ERCs maintain copies of data files collected by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). These files cover K12 data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), postsecondary data from THECB, employment data from the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), and additional education data from the National Student Clearinghouse and the National Center for Education Statistics. The ERCs pay for the data they receive from state agencies.

Subsequent legislation in 2013 formalized and strengthened the role of the ERC Advisory Board that governs the ERCs. The board is chaired by THECB, and its members include the ERC directors and representatives from TEA and TWC. The board is an official government body, meets at least quarterly, and is authorized to share data with other states.

The Texas Legislature continues to promote use of ERC data for research and policy. A 2015 bill to support student achievement and college and career preparation included provisions for training academic counselors and using ERC data to research students' education pathways.

The state authorizes ERCs for fixed terms and periodically reviews information from existing and prospective ERC host institutions before renewing or awarding new contracts. The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) and The University of Texas at Dallas currently host ERCs, and in early 2017 a third ERC was approved at the University of Houston.

Working with Researchers

The ERC data request process
The process for requesting and obtaining ERC data varies by center, but all proposals must be reviewed and approved by the ERC Advisory Board. Proposals are submitted to individual ERCs, where staff members can work with researchers to clarify and refine their data requests before presenting them to the board. The board reviews up to five proposals for each ERC at its quarterly meetings on a first-come, first-served basis and issues letters of approval for the research projects it authorizes. Approval is valid for two years, unless the research is being funded by longer-term grant. ERCs set their own pricing models for approved research projects.
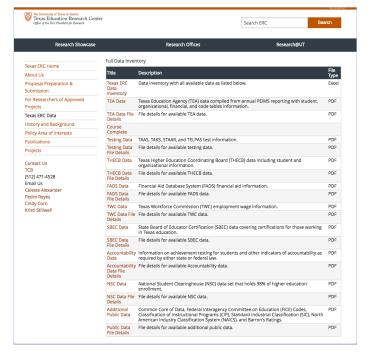
Figure 1. The data inventory on the University of Texas at Austin's ERC website allows researchers to browse datasets currently available from the ERC and to create targeted data requests.

Transparency and support for researchers

The ERC provides researchers with information about accessing and using the data they have available in order to create a smooth research request process and ensure that research aligns with state goals and policy interests. The website for the UT Austin ERC features an inventory of its data, a list of policy areas of focus, and links to past projects, in addition to a complete overview of the research request process. Expectations for researchers, from their initial research proposal request through publication of their findings, are clearly documented. These resources reduce the time and effort required for ERC staff members to answer questions and clarify researchers' proposals.

Data Governance and Data Privacy

Texas's ERCs manage and protect data through a system of thoroughly documented processes and procedures. Roles and responsibilities related to proposal requirements, requesting data for research and fulfilling data requests are clearly defined. The ERCs maintain data in a secure repository, and researchers can access the data for their approved projects only on the ERC campuses at approved locations.

The ERCs' processes also ensure that data are provided to researchers securely and responsibly and that researchers use the data appropriately. Research proposals must link the data elements being requested to the research question to demonstrate their relevance. Researchers are required to submit their projects to an Institutional Review Board and to comply with confidentiality agreements. All individuals who will have access to the data must be trained in Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) compliance and in how to mask data to prevent identity disclosure.

By effectively establishing processes and responsibilities, the ERCs can support a wide array of research. In March 2017, 90 researchers had active ERC data projects at the UT Austin location. In response to state legislation and interest from researchers, the ERCs also are starting to develop standardized queries for frequently requested information, high school feedback reports, and tools to help high school students and counselors make decisions about applying for college.

Additional Resources

Education Research Center Data Repository, Texas State University
http://www.education.txstate.edu/orsp/data-resources/erc.html

Increasing Organizational Capacity: Successful Partnerships and Collaboration with Researchers: SLDS Webinar
https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/10162

Increasing Structural Capacity: Developing a Research Request Process: SLDS Webinar
https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/10488

Increasing Structural Capacity: Streamlining the Research Request Process: SLDS Webinar
https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/8882

Texas Education Research Center, University of Texas at Austin
https://research.utexas.edu/erc/