

SWOT for BRDI

SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

(Credited to Albert S. Humphrey, a management consultant)

Our goal: not profit, but advancing the cause of available scientific data.

These slides are not either to discuss scientific data as a whole, or the economics of the National Academies; they're about how this Board works.

Strengths of the Academies

Credibility: prestige, age, past influential reports.

Impartiality.

Reports keep to schedule.

Experienced and expert staff.

Can provide evidence/excuse for some decision taken by an agency.

Access to top scientists

Willingness of the scholarly community to cooperate

Weaknesses

We just write reports, we don't actually build anything.

Reports are often fairly vague since they must reflect “consensus”.

Reports are slow: at least a year for a full study.

In general, NRC does not do or fund experiments; we have to rely on what has already been published.

Opportunities

All the government agencies are struggling with the details of data management and access.

Some have lots of data and want to have it used productively:
Dept of Energy, NASA, NCAR, ...

Some fund the creation or support of data and want to do that in the most effective way: NSF, NIH, ...

Some support the infrastructure (education, storage) and want to be sure that it serves the needs of scholars (NSF, IMLS)

Threats

If there's no discretionary Federal budget, there's nothing for us.

There are lots of other report-writing soft-money think-tanks, some even respectable (e.g. RAND) and many cheaper.

Some problems are too urgent to wait a year for a report.

Possible political risks related to studies done elsewhere in the Academies (global warming, stem cells, etc)

There are a great many organizations in this space and even the most enthusiastic volunteers have limited time.

Why us?

Two sides to our role:

Do we serve a useful function for the agencies?

Is BRDI a useful opportunity for volunteers to participate?

From the viewpoint of an agency:

We provide credible and respected advice.

We're expensive.

We sort and re-mix information, rather than generating it.

From the viewpoint of a volunteer:

Impact without the effort of funding and running a workshop.

Broader scope than any single area.

Less impact than a really big project, but much less work.