In its twin roles as research enterprise and policy advocate for southern New Jersey, the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs is a vital regional ally.
Since its founding in 2000, the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs at Rutgers University-Camden has been addressing public policy issues that have a significant impact on southern New Jersey. Darren Spielman, the institute’s executive director, and Sarah Allred, the institute’s faculty director and an associate professor of psychology at Rutgers–Camden, discuss the issues that are important to the institute, which is named for New Jersey State Assemblyman and Senator Walter Rand, who was a resident of Camden and an advocate for the region. — Nick DiUlio

RUTGERS MAGAZINE: Describe why the Walter Rand Institute is invaluable to the southern New Jersey region?

DARREN SPIELMAN: We’ve grown into a truly sophisticated research operation and a trusted community partner with deep relationships throughout the region. We describe ourselves as a think-and-do tank. We’re really familiar with the difference between actionable information and information that’s gathered to just sit on a shelf. We actually do stuff.

RM: What are some recent examples you’re proudest of?

DS: We’ve facilitated juvenile delinquency-prevention coalitions in Cumberland and Burlington Counties. In Cumberland, for example, the first countywide juvenile delinquency-prevention effort in the state has reduced juvenile arrests by 44.5 percent since 2009. And we’re working with the Camden County Correctional Facility on multiple efforts, supporting the development and eventual evaluation of an opioid-user diversion program. Our unique value comes from putting out original research about South Jersey, providing objective information about the issue, and also doing sophisticated evaluation. There are not many entities out there looking at this region because, frankly, it’s very much a tale of two states when it comes to South Jersey.

Sarah Allred: We also differ a little from the more traditional academic research going on at Rutgers. The goal of academic research is to further a body of existing knowledge, but our goal is to take the latest research techniques and figure out how they are applicable to community action.

RM: Why do you think it’s “a tale of two states”?

DS: You have a difference in the way economies and demographics are structured. Back in the 1950s when New Jersey had a thriving industrial economy, the north and south were more similar, but when industry and manufacturing collapsed, the north was in a stronger position to recover economically. With its proximity to New York City, it had a more diverse economy already, and North Jersey could feed off that. Meanwhile, industry went down south and you had a real struggle. The glass industry, for instance, disappeared in the deep South Jersey roots. So, this opportunity—this information to effect change in communities throughout southern New Jersey—has been a really amazing experience to be able to do work using science that has a direct benefit to the community.

RM: Why is it important to focus on the qualitative aspect of the issues facing South Jersey?

SA: The kind of work we do is work that has a qualitative impact but also needs to be grounded in quantitative science. You need to be able to back it up with the numbers. And, sometimes, you see things from the numbers you never would have guessed with your intuition.

DS: Objective information is the coin of our realm. We’re trying to do good stuff and produce good information.