

Jazz on Tulsa Time: The Remarkable Story of the Network of Flood Mitigation Champions behind the Tulsa Turnaround

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Decades of scholarship and practitioner reflection point to factors that promote local hazard mitigation planning and implementation, collectively forming the standard model of local hazard mitigation. Attention to the role of individuals and teams of champions working in collaborative networks has been neglected comparatively. We examine Tulsa, Oklahoma's award-winning successes in flood hazard mitigation as an exemplary case to evaluate two questions. Does Tulsa's nationally acclaimed model local hazard mitigation effort fit what the research points to as the standard model of hazard mitigation? Second, how have the characteristics and roles of local champions and the relationships between them shaped Tulsa's successes? We find that the major plotlines in the Tulsa hazard mitigation story confirm the importance of major elements of the standard model of local hazard mitigation. Second, our investigation into the key stakeholders, their professional roles, their personal characteristics, and their relationships provides new insights, some surprising and potentially controversial, into the diverse array of individual and group attributes that enable the other dimensions of the standard model to be effective.

Research Questions

- Does Tulsa's nationally acclaimed model local hazard mitigation effort fit the standard model of hazard mitigation?
- How have the characteristics and roles of local champions and the relationships between them shaped Tulsa's flood risk mitigation efforts?

Methodology

Data sets were systematically analyzed, including primary sources including plan documents, media stories, participant histories, and stakeholder interviews, as well as secondary sources like peer-reviewed journal articles, edited book chapters, and graduate student monographs about the Tulsa experience. Material was then coded to identify the individuals and organizations involved in the planning processes, the specific policies and programs included in the plans, and the cross-referencing and integration across the plans. Researchers also utilized an organizational network mapping approach to focus on key champions within a network rather than the entire network of stakeholders. The draft manuscript was shared with key informants to allow for feedback.



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Findings: The Tulsa Story in the Context of the Standard Model of Hazard Mitigation

In answering the first question, our findings confirm that many of the main dimensions of the standard model of hazard mitigation (see page 3), and sheds light on the structure and evolution of Tulsa's hazard mitigation network over time. Interviewees presented their networks as a "jazz band system," focused on "light general control and maximum freedom for innovation," aligning with earlier findings that a small-world approach has advantages for mitigation over a hierarchical approach better suited for preparedness and response (Lyles 2015). Other findings include:

- Windows of opportunity, like the 1974, 1976, and 1984 floods, can be critical external drivers of mitigation efforts, along with inputs of federal resources and the support of national experts
- Local capacity and commitment are critical, including the election of officials committed to risk reduction, hiring staff to dedicate time and effort and technical expertise, to get regulation and funding approved at the local level
- Local advocates play a critical role as well, including outsider grassroots agitation along with the tireless advocacy of individuals
- The human dimensions of success are evident in Tulsa in both the presence of multiple policy entrepreneurs, and the continuity of policy entrepreneurs over time (Meo et al. 2004)

In addition to these findings, questions remain about how the relationships that connected Tulsa's champions arose and evolved over time, and how these networks have and will continue to evolve at the dawn of the climate emergency era.

Implications for Policy and Practice

We identify four main themes, each of which we present as a recommendation for practitioners and policy makers seeking to replicate Tulsa's successes elsewhere.

1. Foster and Sustain a Team of Champions

In addition to a strong key leader, Tulsa utilized a team of champions with different skills, presence within the community, and knowledge.

2. Make Room for Multiple Models of Leadership

Individual members of the team of champions embodied different models of leadership—from technical to political to advocacy.

3. Acknowledge the Personal Sacrifices That Can Arise for a Mitigation Champion

When we fail to engage issues of caring and spirituality in research and practice in the realms of public service, often in favor of focusing on technical, legal, or institutional issues, we are missing a huge part of the story and perhaps the "special sauce" that allows public service to do often-thankless work.

4. Approach Mitigation Primarily as a Community Planning Issue, Not an Emergency Management Function

Tulsa's pattern of professional hazard mitigation leadership centered on planners, engineers, journalists, and community organizers. This finding supports research that points to the better fit of planners' theories, expertise, training, and modes of engaging the public than emergency managers for long-term risk reduction.

Additional Information

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More about the Dr. Lyles' work can be found at <https://urbanplanning.ku.edu/ward-lyles>. More about Rachel Riley's work can be found at: <http://xwww.southernclimate.org/pages/person/rachel-riley>

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