In 1987 the Indiana University Department of Sociology, led by Professor James Wood, determined that a full-service, full-time survey research center would enhance the university’s research mission, particularly for social scientists. The Institute for Social Research already housed a small survey center with part-time directors, primarily for the purpose of supporting the Sociological Research Practicum and an occasional omnibus poll of the state of Indiana. The search resulted in the appointment of John M. Kennedy, who was directing a similar survey center at the University of Hartford. Kennedy’s unique combination of academic preparation, intellectual and entrepreneurial interests, and practical experience led to his appointment as the director of the Center for Survey Research (CSR).

John started his undergraduate education at The Pennsylvania State University but suspended his studies to join the army and serve in Viet Nam. Following his service, he earned a B.A. from the University of Maryland in 1972 and then an M.A. at Penn State. After four years at the U.S. Bureau of the Census, John returned to Penn State to finish his Ph.D. in sociology in 1984.

John quickly recognized that with only one other fulltime employee, the best way to grow CSR was to use cutting-edge technology and high quality data collection standards. He sought out challenging projects that he believed would insure CSR’s long-term success and enhance its reputation within the survey research community. He upgraded CSR’s technology to establish the infrastructure that made it possible to manage a variety of small- and large-scale local, regional, and national projects. Among these ventures was a series of NASA funded projects. In 1987, John, with Thomas Pinnell, a doctoral student in the School of Library and Information Science, launched the NASA projects that surveyed aerospace engineers, scientists, and students in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. Together, they produced over 80 papers and technical reports that culminated in a two-volume book on the diffusion of knowledge in the aerospace industry.

The NASA work, coupled with contracts from the Indiana state government, made it possible to expand from an almost entirely part-time staff to a full-time staff. Over time, CSR capabilities and technical sophistication grew under John’s leadership. With his leadership came even more ambitious projects—for example, the National Survey of Student Engagement, a national survey of college students. John’s organizational skills, use of the latest technology, and ability to attract skilled personnel made it possible to conduct survey more than two million students annually across 750 colleges and universities.

John’s modus operandi was to follow Aristotle’s advice in the Nicomachean Ethics: “The things we have to learn before we do them, we learn by doing them.” He took the time to hone management skills needed to direct a growing research center and to provide staff with professional development opportunities. As word of his expertise spread, John increasingly was asked by faculty colleagues and students for advice on how to address complicated research challenges. His knowledge regarding research design, his patience with faculty members who knew a great deal less, and his generosity were second to none.

John served as president (1997–1998) of the Society for Applied Sociology. He has been active in the American Sociological Association (ASA) for three decades and was an ASA visiting fellow in 1998 while directing the CSR. He served on the 50th anniversary program committee for the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) and served on the standards committee in 2004. More recently, he was founding editor of Survey Practice, an electronic journal. For many years, John informally convened other directors of academic survey research organizations during the AAPOR conference because he felt that academic survey centers’ issues were not necessarily addressed by the greater AAPOR community. Recently, this group of directors formally established the Association of Academic Survey Research Organizations (AASRO). The AASRO executive committee created a funded award in John’s name for survey innovations. John was awarded the lifetime achievement award at the 2012 AASRO directors’ meeting.

John’s longstanding interest in research ethics and integrity led to his selection as chair of the American Sociological Association committee that drafted ASA’s current ethics code. As director of the CSR, he was called upon by faculty and graduate students to assist them with human subjects applications. He was a member and chair of the IUB Standing Committee on Research Integrity from 1988 to 2010. He has been a member of the Institutional Review Board since 2000 and is currently the chair. For over a decade, he served on NIH panels to review proposals for research on research integrity and the ethics of human research.

From his earliest days at IU, John was confident of CSR’s potential to become a world-class survey center. When the CSR was chosen to conduct the American National Election Survey in 2002, it was clear to the survey research community that the CSR was among the best in the world and that John’s technical, management, and survey skills were responsible for that status.

John’s life and career are marked by diverse interests. He biked to campus almost every day. A serious scholar, he also was a prankster, and the CSR staff members were his favorite targets. They loved him for that and for his deep commitment to the high standards of excellence to which he held them and himself.

Most important, John is a devoted family man who now has more time to spend with his family. He plans to continue biking, practicing yoga, and mastering Spanish in the coming years.

Nancy Bannister
George Kuh
Brian Powell