



**Public Affairs
Research Council
of Alabama**

Measuring What Matters

Where Better Data Meets Research Design

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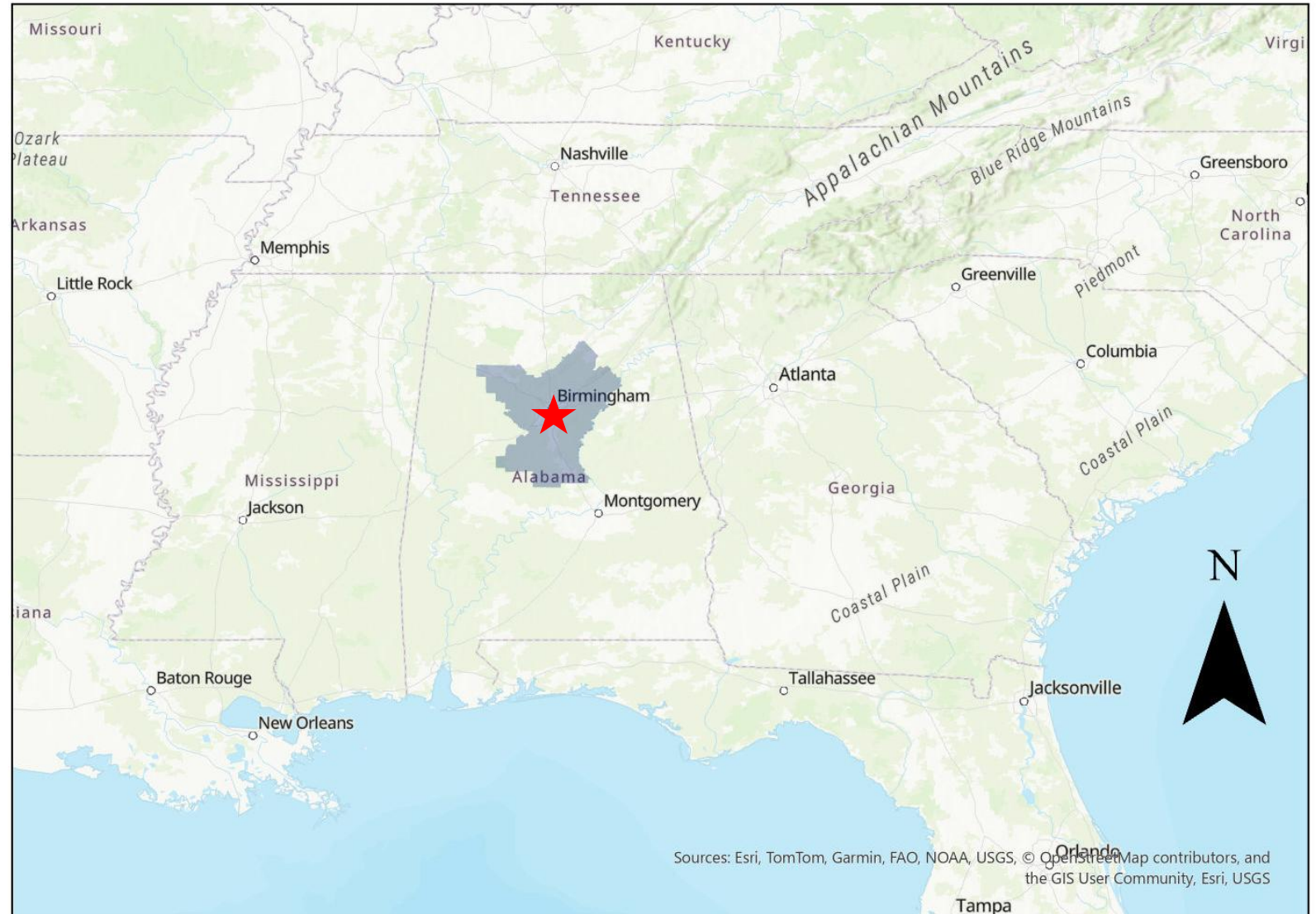
Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama®

PARCA

a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that
conducts research and analysis on public
policy issues in Alabama

The Ask

Assess the statewide economic contribution of a private Christian university in Homewood, Alabama, for FY2025.



We wanted to go beyond measuring the university's economic impact. We wanted to give the client a broader understanding of its contributions and uncover information that could help inform decisions in ways traditional studies had not.

Move beyond a traditional economic impact study to capture a more complete picture of a private university's contributions to the state.

Use economic modeling, location analytics, and workforce intelligence to uncover insights that traditional approaches may overlook.

Multiple Data Sources



UNIVERSITY OPERATIONS



- Staff and faculty payroll
- Goods and services purchases
- Day-to-day operating expenses
- Student and academic services
- Local vendor spending



UNIVERSITY CAPITAL EXPENDITURES



- New construction projects
- Renovations and facility upgrades
- Spending on materials, labor, and professional services
- One-time and ongoing capital investments



OUT-OF-STATE STUDENT SPENDING



- Out-of-state student enrollment
- Spending on housing, food, transportation, and other living expenses
- Direct spending in the local and regional economy



VISITOR SPENDING (Placer.ai)



- Placer.ai quantifies the number of visits to campus
- Visitation volume, aggregated origins, distance patterns, and timing (anonymized data)
- Visitor spending estimated using appropriate assumptions



ALUMNI & WORKFORCE CONTRIBUTIONS (Jobs EQ)



- Alumni employment by industry and occupation (JobsEQ)
- Locations of alumni employment
- Earnings and workforce contributions
- Insights into talent development and regional workforce alignment

The Unexpected Lesson

More data gave us more possibilities. It also gave us more decisions to make.

Integrating multiple analytical tools raised new questions about methodology, assumptions, and interpretation.

Three Tools. Three Opportunities.

1

Placer.ai

Location analytics

Who is coming?
Where from?
How often?



Placer.ai

2

REMI Proseris

Economic modeling

What happens when economic
activity enters the regional
economy?



PROSERIS

3

Chmura JobsEQ

Workforce intelligence

Where do occupations, demand
and talent pathways intersect?



What is Location Analytics?

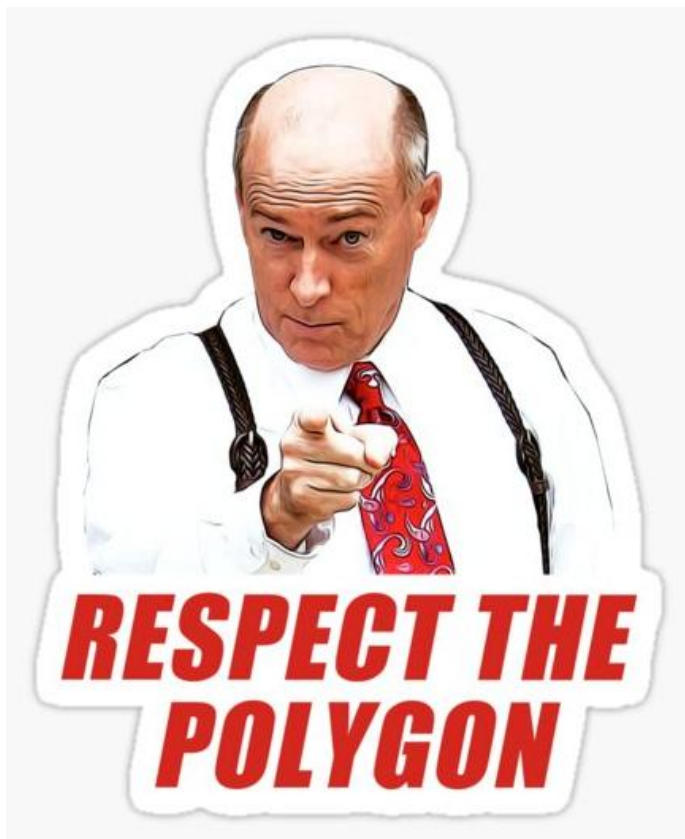
A way to understand visitation patterns using anonymized location data.



IT STARTS BY DEFINING A PLACE — A GEOFENCE.

If the geography is wrong, the analysis starts wrong.

Respect the Polygon

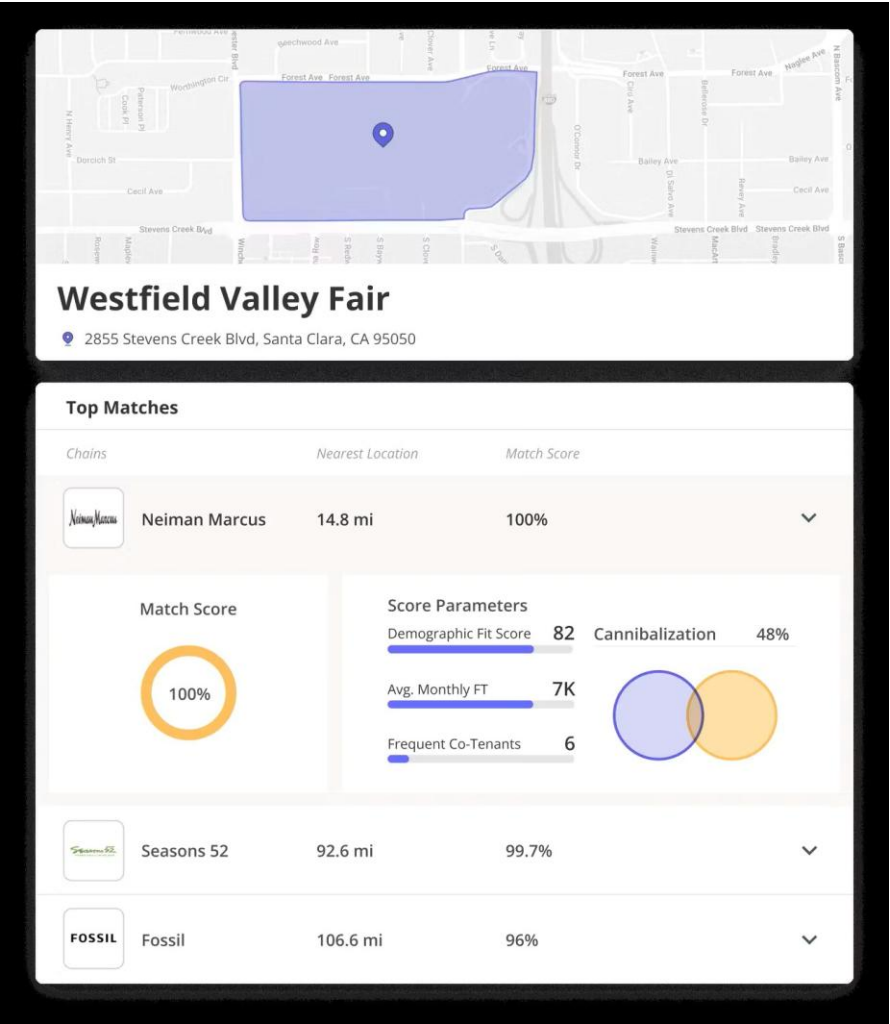


The polygon boundary
determines
what you measure.

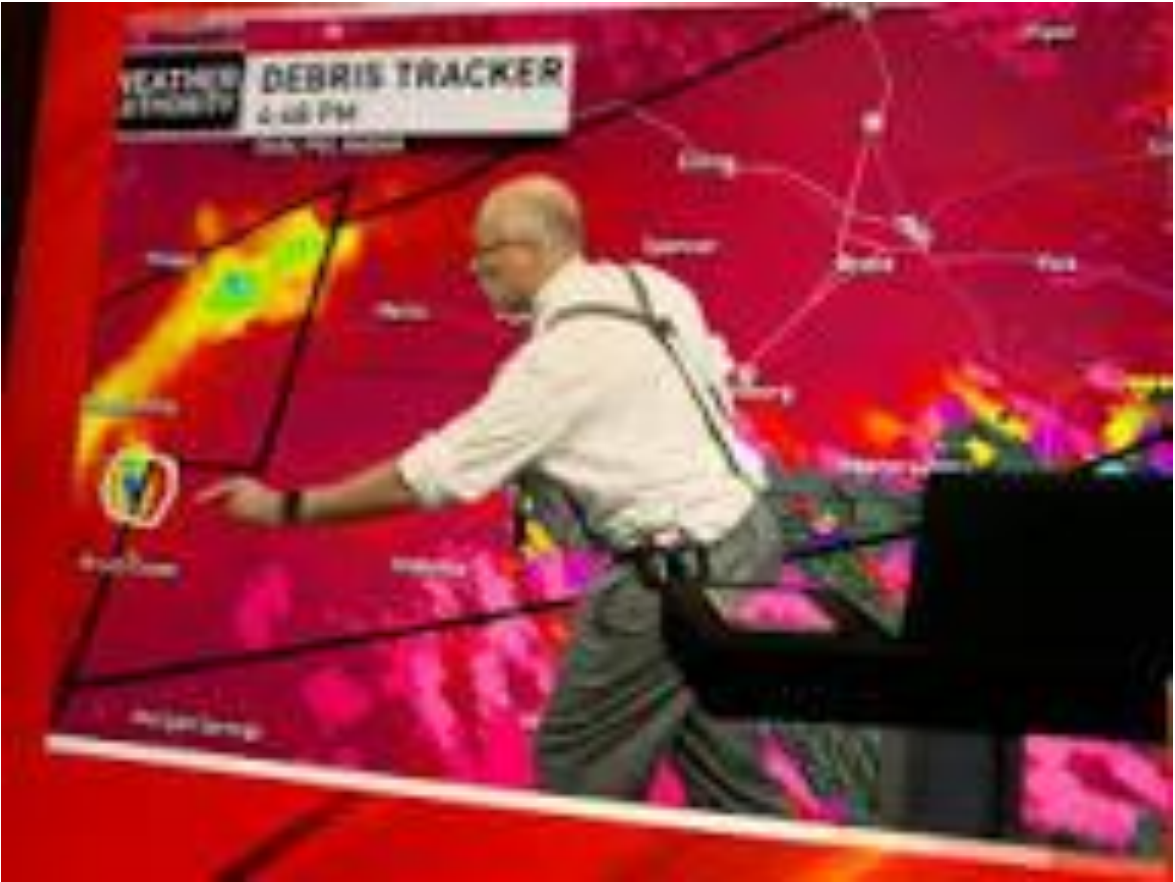


The Polygon

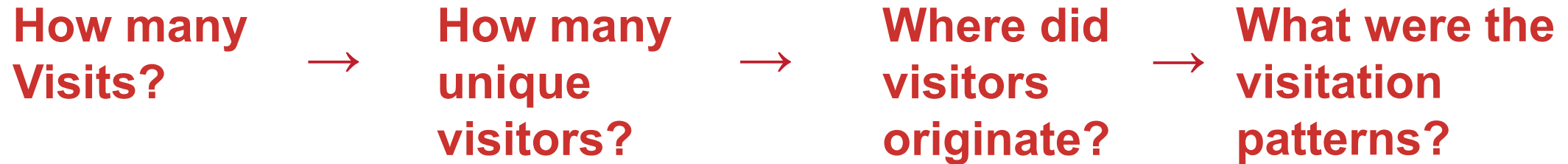
Placer.ai Polygon Example



James Spann Polygon Example



Location analytics can reveal a visitor population that traditional data cannot.

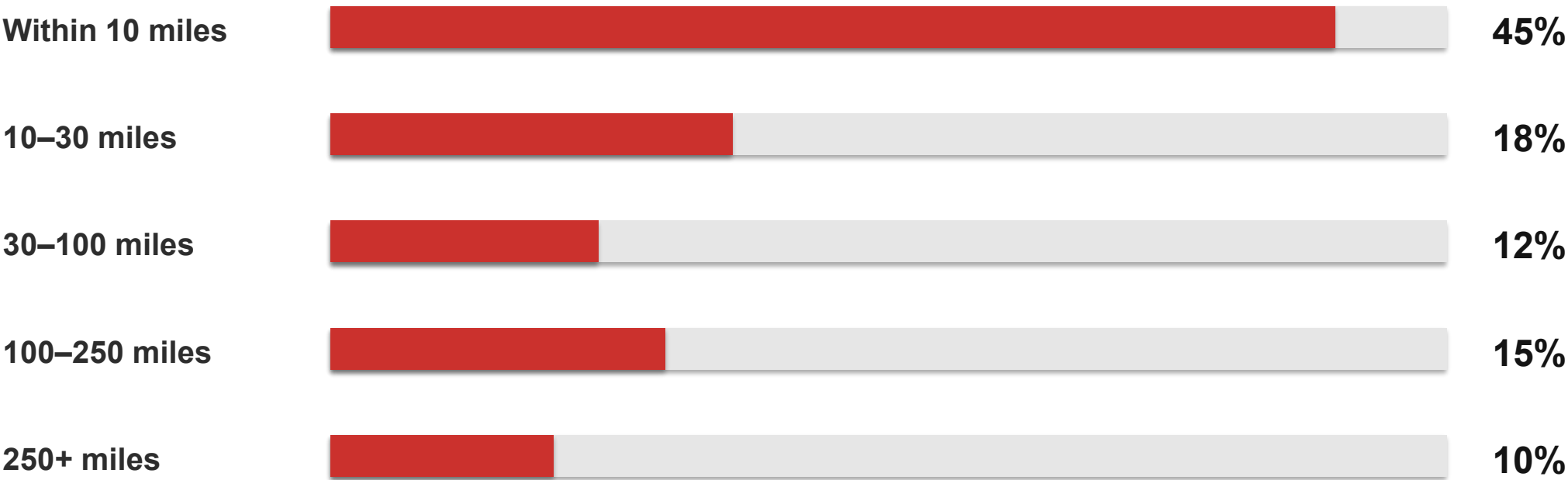


Placer gives us better observation.

The research design still determines what those observations mean.

200,000 visitors ≠ one economic population

Hypothetical campus example — synthetic data



Should the same tourism-spending assumption apply to every visitor?

Illustrative example only. Numbers are constructed and do not represent client data.

One visitor count. Very different economic stories.

Location data can distinguish patterns. It cannot, by itself, tell us each visitor's spending behavior.

LOCAL VISITOR

8 miles from campus

Attends an event
May buy a meal
No overnight stay

REGIONAL VISITOR

75 miles from campus

May be a day trip
Different travel costs
Different spending profile

OVERNIGHT VISITOR

300 miles from campus

Hotel stay
Multiple meals
Transportation + other
spending

Same visitor count ≠ same direct-spending assumption

What the data can tell us — and what it can't.

The research question determines which source — or combination of sources — is needed.

LOCATION ANALYTICS

Can help describe:

- visitation volume
- aggregated origins
- frequency / repeat visitation
- distance patterns
- timing

Cannot tell us the visitor's identity, primary reason for the trip, or actual spending.

INTERCEPT SURVEY

Can ask about:

- primary purpose of trip
- party size
- overnight stay
- lodging behavior
- reported spending

Useful when attribution or visitor behavior must be established directly.

ECONOMIC MODEL

Can estimate:

- economic effects
- employment
- income / GDP
- output
- other modeled outcomes

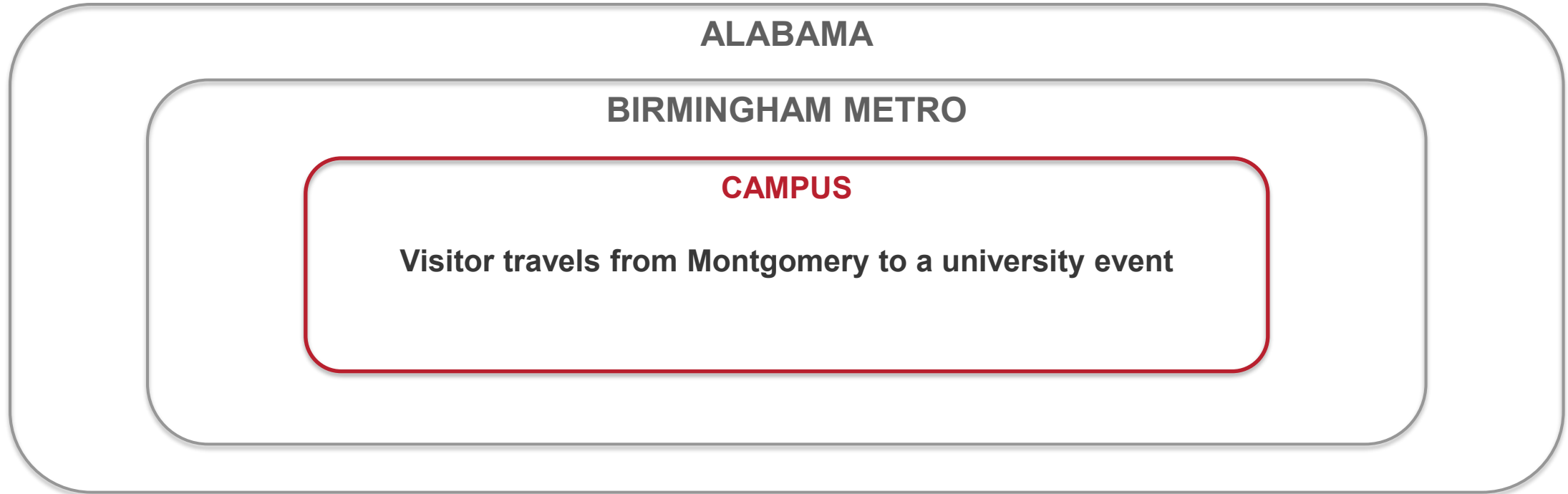
Depends on the direct activity and assumptions defined before the model is run.

Know where each data source stops. Don't ask it to answer a question it wasn't designed to answer.

Defining Geography

The question changes with the geography.

A trip can be new spending for one study area and internal spending for another.



For Birmingham: potentially imported spending **For Alabama:** spending originates inside the state

The study geography determines what counts as external to the economy being measured.

The missing middle is research design and rigorous project management.



The tool does not define the question.

REMI Proseris: Own the inputs.

A sophisticated model can estimate the consequences of the inputs we give it.

It cannot decide whether those inputs answer the research question.

DEFINE

Population + geography

TRANSLATE

Direct economic inputs

MODEL

Economic response

INTERPRET

What the result means

JobsEQ

Labor Market Analytics Platform

Provides regional workforce intelligence, including:

- Employment and occupational trends
- Wages and projected demand
- Workforce supply and skills gaps
- Industry and regional comparisons

Resume Forensics

Professional Profile Analysis

Uses online résumé and professional profile data to examine:

- Where alumni appear to work
- Industries and occupations represented
- Employers and career pathways
- Education, skills, and credentials

Alumni data: useful, but not the whole human-capital story.

The project had two useful views of alumni — but they did not answer the same question.

INSTITUTIONAL ALUMNI DATA

59,179 living alumni
29,443 reside in Alabama

Strong for:

- geographic footprint
- alumni presence in the state

JOBSEQ PROFESSIONAL PROFILES

10,692 Samford-associated profiles
4,012 matched to detailed occupations

Strong for:

- observable occupations
- labor-market context

What we could not establish: that the occupational profiles represented the Alabama-resident alumni population.

Lesson: data linkage matters as much as data availability.

A stronger human-capital design starts before JobsEQ.

Instead of asking only where alumni appear occupationally, build the analysis around the workforce question.

1 DEFINE

What does the client mean by “workforce contribution”?

2 CONNECT

Programs / completions
→ occupational pathways

3 LOCATE

Where graduates live and, if possible, work

4 COMPARE

Demand, wages, growth and supply gaps

5 USE

Program strategy, partnerships and recruitment

Outside the model, better primary data — graduate outcomes, employer input, program-to-occupation mapping — could make the human-capital story much stronger.

Additional Added Value Opportunities



What began as a standard economic impact study became a valuable opportunity to test new data and methods—and share **key lessons for future analyses**.

CAMPUS SAFETY

A conversation about geofencing prompted an entirely different question: How could the same information support campus operations and safety?

Three Tools. Three Lessons

1

PLACER.AI

Don't just count the
population.

UNDERSTAND IT.

2

REMI PROSERIS

Don't just run the model.

OWN THE INPUTS.

3

JOBSEQ

Don't start with the data.

**START WITH THE
QUESTION.**

Expanded Lessons Learned

1. **DEFINE THE QUESTION FIRST.** New tools expand options; they do not choose the research question.
2. **RESPECT THE GEOGRAPHY.** The boundary changes the population and the economic interpretation.
3. **SEGMENT BEFORE SPENDING.** A visitor count is not automatically a defensible spending input.
4. **OWN THE INPUTS.** Model sophistication cannot substitute for a well-defined direct effect.
5. **KNOW WHERE EACH SOURCE STOPS.** Use the right source for the question; combine sources when one cannot establish attribution or behavior.
6. **DESIGN FOR THE DECISION.** The best analysis ends with information the client can actually use.

The Take-Away

**Better tools expand
what we can measure.**

**Better research determines
what we should measure.**

**The tools matter.
The research decisions still belong to us.**

Acknowledgements

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