The 2019 RGK/ARNOVA President’s Award is presented to Gary Adler, Penn State University; Damon Mayrl, Colby College; Rebecca Sager, Loyola Marymount University; and Jonathan Coley, Oklahoma State University, for their research on the beliefs of local officials and the regulation of church-state relationships.

These researchers note that local church-state relationships in the U.S. today “play out in new circumstances, including increased religious diversity and changing jurisprudence more accommodating of church-state interaction. As a consequence, the possibility of church-state conflict and the power of local authorities over religious activity have grown... [however]...Relatively little is known about, how, why, and to what end local bureaucrats manage church-state relations.” This project seeks to learn how local officials perceive, facilitate, promote, and/or impede religious activity across diverse local communities?

In a pilot phase of their project, through interviews of leaders of religious organizations in six counties across the U.S. about their interactions with government entities, the researchers found evidence of extensive church-state interaction, limited evidence of church-state conflict, evidence that interactions between religious organizations and the state are buffered by intermediary entities, and evidence of extensive bureaucratic involvement with religious organizations. In the next phase of the project, the researchers will “seek to demonstrate how local context and individual characteristics influence the perceptions and behaviors of local government officials, through a survey of local elected officials in the state of Pennsylvania.

The study is expected to “provide insights into the religiosity of local officials and their preferences for church-state interaction...”; “demonstrate how contextual and individual factors influence local officials’ preferences and actions towards religious groups”; and “provide a tool for local governments, and national associations of government officials, to understand the boundaries of church-state interaction.”

The selection committee for the award was comprised of Dennis R. Young (Chair; Georgia State University and Case Western Reserve University), Mary Tschirhart (Ohio State University) and Richard Steinberg (IUPUI).

The selection committee, the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at the University of Texas at Austin, and the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action take great pleasure in awarding the 2019 RGK-ARNOVA President’s Award to Drs. Gary Adler, Damon Mayrl, Rebecca Sager and Jonathan Coley.