

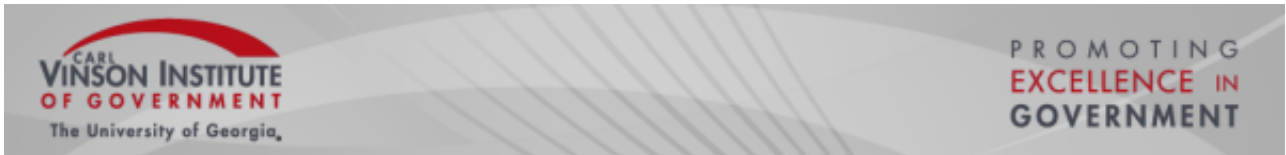


Learning from the Vinson Institute of Government

Author : Mike Smith

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Last week Kelley O'Brien, Ellen Bradley, and I visited [the Vinson Institute of Government](#) at the University of Georgia. We had met their new Director, [Laura Meadows](#), at a SCUPSO meeting (Southern Consortium of University Public Service Organizations) in Baltimore and had agreed to meet again later. There are differences between the School and the Vinson Institute, including how we fit into the administrative structure of our universities, but we also have much in common and our meeting was a great opportunity to share and learn from one another. Our visit was rich and rewarding (and fun), and I will only touch on a handful of my many positive impressions.



Laura Meadows

Our missions are remarkably similar. “For more than 85 years, the [Vinson] Institute of Government has worked with public officials throughout Georgia and around the world to improve governance and people’s lives.” We have almost exactly the same number of employees and their home state also has been the overwhelming focus of their work—though I was interested in learning more about their international work. State funding makes up only 30% of their operating



budget; the School's state funding now has slipped to less than 50% and future cuts inevitably will continue that decline. Vinson has gone through the difficult cultural transition of generating more revenue, and we can learn from their experience. A greater proportion of the School's work is focused on the law, but it was interesting to learn that they are doing lots of incorporation studies and have looked to North Carolina law for guidance. The Institute has reduced its emphasis on publications from when I first visited nearly 20 years ago. Their faculty members are classified as public-service faculty without tenure, and research and publications consequently are not as critical to their reappointment and promotion.

The Vinson Institute has had an international presence since 1998 through its [International Center](#), which was started with a state appropriation. The Center is directed by [Rusty Brooks](#) and through his remarkable efforts they have especially strong relationships and programs in South Korea and China. For example, they provide training in China on rotating topics and they involve state and local officials from Georgia in the teaching. The foreign officials also come to the United States for several weeks of experiential education that includes the opportunity to see democracy in action. The Institute takes other Georgia officials to these countries to expand their perspective and exchange information with their international counterparts. Vinson also has a program that brings Korean officials to Georgia for two-year appointments as visiting fellows. The fellows come with specific research projects and they share their considerable expertise with Georgia officials in ways that benefit their local communities.



Rusty Brooks

The School has brainstormed about expanding our geographic presence beyond North Carolina, including the possibility of international work. I am sure that we have much to learn from the Vinson Institute and their impressive experience. They have been strategic in involving Georgia officials in international training and visits, and they have created a separate organizational structure that insulates them from criticism that their work in other countries comes at the expense of work in Georgia. The state and local officials who have visited other countries have seen the value of international programs, have returned home with ideas for their communities, and they have become champions of the Center's work. Everyone holds out the hope that a foreign economic development investment will come to Georgia, but they also see other advantages from



the international work even if that never happens. Georgia has demonstrated that it is possible to create an international program over time that is recognized as a good thing by the campus and by their traditional public constituencies.

We also got to learn something about the Vinson Institute's extensive training program from [Stacy Jones](#), the head of their Governmental Training, Education, and Development Division. [One other difference from the School is that they are organized into divisions based on functions and programs.] The training division does curriculum development, instructional design, program management, and program delivery—with their own faculty and in partnership with adjuncts—many of whom are public officials. Vinson's array of programs is impressive and slightly overwhelming. For example, Georgia law mandates training for local elected officials and the Institute is in the process of creating a lifelong academy of courses for county commissioners. Stacy and her colleagues will be designing and creating 75 six-hour specialty classes over the next 18 months. The collaborative development process that they are using is impressive.



Stacy Jones

As we have brainstormed about the School's future, one issue we have identified is how to expand our training capacity—both to meet a growing demand and to generate much-needed revenue. We have much to learn from our colleagues in Athens. It is clear that Georgia officials place a high value on the training they receive through the Vinson Institute, and Stacy and her colleagues have found a way to develop and scale programs that respond to local needs. My hope is that we can learn more about their approach to training as we explore ways to scale our programs for North Carolina officials.

We met many other impressive people during our visit and they are doing amazing work in Georgia. For example, we heard a tour de force presentation from [Eric McCrae](#) who leads the Institute's [Office of Information and Technology Outreach Services](#). He also gets extra credit for favoring vinegar-based over tomato-based barbecue. I cannot possibly do justice to the impressive array of GIS projects that they are doing in Georgia. [Ted Baggett](#) came into the meeting with a copy of David Ammons's *Municipal Benchmarks* book, which was created when David was at the Vinson Institute. Ted is an attorney in the Governmental Services and Research Division, and



much of his work is similar to the work of the School's local government lawyers. There are rich opportunities to share information and we only scratched the surface during this visit.



Eric McCrae



Ted Baggett

Many thanks to Laura Meadows, and also to [Dennis Epps](#), the Institute's Deputy Director [who has



a degree from NC State and still wore a Carolina blue tie just to make us feel welcome] and [Karen Barger](#), the Associate Director for Administration. Not only was their hospitality off the charts, but we connected in ways that made everyone want to continue meeting and learning from one another.



Karen Barger



Dennis Epps