SCUPSO Conference 2013

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The 2013 [SCUPSO](#) (Southern Consortium of University Public Service Organizations) Conference was held last Thursday and Friday in Baltimore. This year it was co-hosted by the [Schaefer Center for Public Policy](#) (University of Baltimore), the [Institute for Governmental Service](#) (University of Maryland), and the [Institute for Public Administration](#) (University of Delaware). Others attending from the School were Ellen Bradley, Dave Brown, and Kelley O'Brien. I was happy to have others involved because next April 24-25 we will be hosting the SCUPSO Conference in Chapel Hill.

As I've mentioned in the past, SCUPSO is interesting for a variety of reasons. The organizations vary in terms of their focus and size, but all are committed to service and they are much more in line with our public-official mission than traditional academic units. I always feel like I'm in the presence of kindred spirits. I also inevitably learn something interesting from even the smallest centers and institutes, who often have little or no state support and who must be creative to survive. Let me share a few random observations from this year's conference.

The opening session included panelists from three different universities who talked generally about how universities approach public service and applied research. I was especially interested in the comments of [Dan Rich](#), the former provost and now a public policy professor at the University of Delaware. His main theme was that the changing political economy of higher education—moving from a public good to a private good—threatens the long-term viability of public affairs programs and especially challenges the value of public affairs-related engagement with the community. He believes strongly that the current emphasis on business entrepreneurship is too narrow, and he argued that universities are far too conservative to accept the risk of failure that goes with genuine entrepreneurship. In particular, Rich worries that "the romance of entrepreneurship" threatens to displace a university's broader commitment to community engagement. It was an interesting counterpoint to the usual perspective on entrepreneurship in higher education.

I participated in a session on financial sustainability with [Matthew Duke, Senior Director of the Center for Government and Public Affairs at Auburn University at Montgomery](#). Matthew comes from Accenture in the private sector, and he has brought a consultant's perspective to the Center's work. Rather than just asking public clients to pay for a service, he partners with them to seek grants that the public agency otherwise would not get. For example, he offers grant writing as a fee-for-service, and the agency also contracts with the Center for an evaluation of the project if the client wins the grant. Matthew also has shifted from a more exclusive focus on executive agencies to establishing relationships with the Alabama legislature. The result has been encouraging and the legislature has contracted with the Center to conduct a number of efficiency studies that have reduced expenses in state agencies.

There were other good sessions, including one by [Brian Dabson,](#) Director of the [Institute of Public Policy](#) with the Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri. Brian has been given the responsibility of insuring that the Institute is "the pre-eminent source of independent, nonpartisan, evidence-based public policy analysis for Missouri." He has visited Chapel Hill and talked with us about our goals related to public policy. It was interesting to see the progress he is making through networking and collaboration on his campus. He has established the IPP Policy Research Scholars, a group of ten faculty members from different units who have expressed an interest in connecting their academic research to the policymaking process. Brian is shifting the Center's soft-money funded staff slightly away from program evaluation and project management and more in the direction of translation services—translating the policy implications of existing academic research. This summary doesn't do justice to Brian's work, and I'm interested in following his progress and learning from his experience.

In some ways the School's closest analogue in SCUPSO has been the [Vinson Institute of Government](#) at the University of Georgia. They have not been as active in recent years, and so it was especially nice to meet their new Director, [Laura Meadows](#). It was interesting to learn a little about their international work, which involves Georgia government officials in a variety of ways. Rather than detract from their Georgia focus, Laura believes that it improves their state-focused work and it is supported by their Georgia public-official clients. There are differences between our two organizations, but I look forward to future conversations so that we can learn from one another.

It is exciting to think about hosting next year's conference and showcasing some of the School's work. It is a very nice group of folks who are committed to doing good work in their states.