



SCUPSO Meeting: SCUPWhat?

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I'm in Washington for a meeting of the SCUPSO directors. SCUPSO stands for Southern Consortium of University Public Service Organizations, which is a group of university-based centers and institutes that do public service work like our own. It is the closest thing that exists to a professional association for the School because everyone does some combination of training, research, and technical assistance for governments in their respective states. SCUPSO has been around for a long time, and its early motto (before my time) was "No Mission, No Purpose, Proud of It." SCUPSO is more serious these days and we have worked together on joint substantive projects—we also are affiliated with and supported by the Southern Growth Policies Board. These meetings are an opportunity to learn from our colleagues in other states. Most of them receive little state funding, which means that they have had to respond to the needs of public officials in ways that can generate revenue.

As the directors talked briefly about the work of their centers and institutes, I was struck by how many are involved in different kinds of survey research for government clients. For example, the University of Arkansas has just completed its seventh annual survey of racial attitudes in Arkansas. Kennesaw State University conducts an annual quality of life survey for the Atlanta metropolitan area. According to our peers, government officials want data on various issues and they are willing to contract with public service centers to collect and analyze it.

We meet in Washington at the offices of the National Association of Counties (NACo). Each year we have a roundtable discussion with NACo's research director, Jackie Byers, and their director of county services, Ed Ferguson. We also hear short presentations from other speakers on topics



facing government—the policy director for the Council on Competitiveness talked about a number of issues, including a study on regional leadership. Tomorrow morning we will have a session with the Director of Publishing for the International City-County Management Association. This item was placed on the agenda at my request because I have heard so much from North Carolina managers about their use of electronic publications from ICMA. I want to know more about what they are doing and how they are doing it.

Regionalism and consolidation emerged as a theme in many of the conversations today. NACo is seeing lots more consolidation of services among local government across the country, largely driven by the economic crisis. Ed Ferguson with NACo believes that the next wave of governmental reform will include consolidation of local governments and a greater emphasis on regional governance structures. Nearly everyone seems to agree that there are too many elected officials and too many units of local government (96,000 nationwide). Ferguson believes that the pressure for consolidation will come from outside of government, and he cited early examples from Indiana and Massachusetts where that pressure is starting to build. The policy director with the Council on Competitiveness claimed that our lack of a regional perspective makes it hard for us to compete with other countries that are organized around larger regions. Businesses think in terms of markets rather than political jurisdictions, and his organization is compiling case studies to illustrate and promote effective regional leadership across the country.

It makes me wonder whether we should be helping North Carolina think more about the pros and cons of our current local government structure. The School has a history of conducting consolidation studies for local governments, which have not resulted in a single consolidation. Does North Carolina really need 100 counties and 540 municipalities? Does Georgia need 159 counties, or does Texas need 254? I understand that this is an emotional and a political question, and so it is hard to see how anyone can lead a constructive examination of the issue. Certainly no professional association like NACo is going to recommend a decrease in its membership. This is not the first issue that I would propose for our expanded work with public policy decision-makers, and perhaps it always will be too nuclear for us. What do you think?

SCUPSO holds an annual conference for the directors and other members of their organizations. This year the conference will be in Knoxville, Tennessee in April. As I learn more about the program, I will pass it along in the event you may want to attend. It is a good group of people who are struggling with many of the same issues we are working on—I think you would enjoy it. Plus we could pile into a van and make a road trip out of it.