



*Melvin B Hill, Jr.*

*University-based public service organizations in the United States face distinct challenges and opportunities in bridging the gap between the academic resources of their institutions and the needs of the sponsoring society. The problems they encounter include confusion over definitions and expectations, lack of institutional commitment to and articulation of the outreach mission, and suspicions about public service programs both from within and without. As one of the oldest and largest of these units, the Carl Vinson Institute of Government of the University of Georgia provides an interesting case study. An ongoing challenge for these organizations is to mix and match institutional and personal objectives and capabilities to optimize the contributions of the university to the society.*

## **At the Juncture of the Academy and the Community: The Carl Vinson Institute**

On the occasion of the celebration of his ninetieth birthday, the Honorable Carl Vinson, the esteemed United States Congressman from Georgia for more than fifty years, reflected on his life in this way: "If I had to select one factor that may have played a dominant role in reaching my years, I would name the challenge of Public Service."

While it would be an exaggeration to claim that public service is the key to longevity, it is a high and noble calling, one that enhances the quality of life not only of those for whom the service is rendered, but of those who engage in it as well. One place in which public service can be practiced in an interesting and meaningful way is in a university public service organization.

Among university-based public service institutes, centers, and research bureaus in the United States, the Carl Vinson Institute of Government is a veritable senior citizen. Of course, like other senior citizens, it has changed a lot over the years. In fact, as this is written, the Vinson Institute is in the midst of a new strategic planning initiative being undertaken by a new director. Obviously, what results from that effort will affect the sense of mission, goals, work program, and direction of the organization for the foreseeable future.

Before reviewing the history and work program of the Vinson Institute, it is important to enunciate some First Principles. The first of these is that while the Vinson Institute is a public service organization dedicated to meeting the needs and demands of state and local policy-makers and practitioners, it is nevertheless

a part of the higher education academy, for better and for worse. Its stature, integrity, credibility, and indeed survival depend upon its adherence to academic principles and standards in its teaching, research, and public service programs.

The second overarching principle is that the Vinson Institute is an educational arm of the University of Georgia, not a political or public relations arm. Its function is not to provide convenient access to policy-makers to enhance lobbying efforts of the university, nor is it to serve as staff to the Governor's Office, the General Assembly, the local government associations, or any other outside entity. Rather, it is to provide timely, objective, germane, and thoughtful educational assistance of various kinds to all of its constituencies. It is not a political organization, although it has strong ties to political leaders and groups. It must be close to state and local policy makers and practitioners, but not too close. Finally, it is distinguished from a state agency by the fact that it does not take its direction from the political leadership, but rather from the academy itself and from the educational needs and demands of its principal clients and customers and of the public generally. In Georgia, this independent role of the University of Georgia and all of the other institutions of the University System of Georgia is recognized and affirmed by the Constitution of Georgia itself, which provides that "the government, control, and management of the University System of Georgia and all of the institutions in said system shall be vested in the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia."

Finally, it should be remembered that the university has a special role in the society, because it is virtually the only place in which the mind can be respected and celebrated for its own sake. The pursuit of knowledge is a high and noble aspiration. While accountability and relevance are important, the university's preeminent role is to serve as the guardian, defender, and steward of knowledge.

### **History, Mission, Goals, and Work Program**

Now celebrating its seventy-first year of service to the people of Georgia, the Vinson Institute can trace its origins back to the summer of 1927, when the Southern Institute of Politics was established at the University of Georgia as a successor to the Furman Institute of Politics at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. The program was regarded as part of the university summer session and ran eleven days. Lectures and roundtable conferences addressed international, national, state, and local affairs. The following summer it sponsored its first conference in Athens for higher state officials for the purpose of discussing problems in Georgia's state government.

From that modest beginning, the Vinson Institute has grown to an organization that in 1998 had over 100 faculty and staff, a "hard money" budget from the university of almost four million dollars (and about twice that again in contracts and grants), and a constituency that encompasses local, regional, statewide, national, and even international audiences.

The mission, goals, and work program of the Vinson Institute are not handed down from on high, but rather are crafted by each director to define the direction and needs of the organization as they exist at that time. During the 1980s and into the mid-1990s, the mission statement was straightforward: "to improve the understanding, policymaking,

and administration of government in a democratic society.” To enhance the clarity of its service mission and to guide program development and implementation, these organizational goals were established:

- To maintain and strengthen the relationship with the leadership of all three branches of state government and of the two major local government associations.
- To develop and offer continuing education programs for officials in all agencies of state government and in the more than 300 Georgia municipalities and 159 Georgia counties.
- To maintain and strengthen the Vinson Institute’s commitment to applied research in response to requests from members of the General Assembly and other state and local government officials.
- To increase the Vinson Institute’s commitment to independent policy research on topics of current national and statewide importance.
- To provide technical assistance to cities, counties, and state agencies.
- To strengthen the program of governmental and civic education for teachers, schools, and the general public.
- To provide readable, useful publications to Georgia public officials and government managers and make them available to the widest possible readership.
- To expand the national (and international) readership of institute publications.
- To enhance the national (and international) reputation of the Vinson Institute as an organization whose staff contribute significantly to knowledge (understanding) about the affairs of state and local government.
- To contribute to the instructional program of public administration, political science, and other disciplines related to the policy and management of state and local government.
- To provide meaningful internship opportunities for college students and graduate students and to promote the establishment of additional local government internship opportunities by individual city and county governments.

In carrying out this mission and its goals, the Vinson Institute engages in a comprehensive work program of instruction and continuing education (including training); research, including policy and applied research; technical assistance, or consulting with individual clients; citizen education; publications; and international outreach.

Governmental training programs have been at the heart of the institute agenda since 1948, when the first Institute for Tax Assessors was held. The first Biennial Institute for State Legislators was held in 1958, with orientation sessions for newly elected legislators and policy workshops for incumbent legislators. Until 1965, the Institute’s training program consisted primarily of annual institutes in Athens for local government groups such as tax assessors, city and county clerks and finance officers,

city and county managers, and others. Today the program annually reaches over 25,000 state and local government officials and others, through 800 separate courses involving almost 12,000 hours of instruction, at convenient locations throughout the state.

Academic contributions are another major focus of the Vinson Institute instructional activities. Several of its faculty hold joint or adjunct appointments in academic departments and teach courses in those departments and/or as part of the Master of Public Administration (MPA) program, which the Vinson Institute has cosponsored with the Department of Political Science since 1975. The faculty member serving as the MPA Coordinator holds a joint appointment with the department.

Research projects are undertaken to find answers to current problems, to analyze and explain complex issues, and to find better ways of doing the public's business. At a university, research is an integral part of the educational process and educational service.

Policy research is undertaken to inform policy decisions. State and local policymakers need reliable and objective information that will help them in their efforts to understand public problems, to consider the viability of alternative policy options for addressing those problems, and to assess the impacts of previous policy decisions and proposed courses of action.

Applied research occurs in the development of books, handbooks, articles, monographs, textbooks, and other publications that are intended primarily for state and local elected officials and for teachers and students. Vinson Institute faculty also conduct applied research to contribute to knowledge about the affairs of state and local government. Research products include books and book chapters published by commercial and university presses and articles in professional journals. Research resulting in such professional publications often contributes to and grows out of technical assistance projects.

In addition to instructional and research activities, the Vinson Institute contributes to improved governmental administration and management through a comprehensive program of technical assistance. Technical assistance is provided to communities and individuals in need of specialized help, such as in personnel administration, financial administration, productivity improvement, and local government reorganization. Improving the administration of government is central to the mission.

Citizen education has been another hallmark of the recent work program of the institute. As Mortimer Adler points out in *We Hold These Truths*, the highest office in the land in a democracy is that of the citizen. Through work with school teachers, students, and the general public, the Vinson Institute has sought to promote a better understanding of governmental institutions and processes. An effective representative democracy depends upon an informed citizenry.

The statewide and national reputation of the Vinson Institute has in large measure been the result of an extensive publications program. Institute publications are in use in governmental agencies and educational institutions in every state in the nation, as well as in many foreign countries. Annual orders of institute publications often exceed 30,000.

The newest initiative of the institute relates to the international outreach program. In July 1998 the International Center for Democratic Governance was created to help

institutionalize a democratic system in emerging democracies, especially through management training and technical assistance.

### **Organizing for University Public Service and Outreach**

Dr. Fred Davison, a former president of the University of Georgia, once said he felt that one of the most important responsibilities he had as president was to maintain a “centrifugal force” in the organization, since the natural tendency at a university was “centripetal.” He also noted that the sponsoring society expected no less and that there was an obligation on the part of the university to ensure that its sights were directed outward and not inward.

A major problem confronting the academy about public service and outreach concerns definitions. “Teaching, research, and service” is the mantra for all university presidents, especially in the public sector, and even more especially in the land-grant, sea-grant universities, but what do these terms mean, and, more specifically, what does the term “service” mean? Many people, including presidents, provosts, and other academic leaders, see service as a mission that is separate and distinct from teaching and research, an add-on to the annual report to show university good will or good citizenship. A better view is to regard service as an integral part of the overall university mission, as teaching and research in the field and in the workplace, as a way of making teaching and research come alive in a tangible way.

Historically, of course, universities were established to be seminaries of learning set apart from the world. These institutions were intentionally insulated and protected from the problems and trials of society to allow for serious and untainted study, contemplation, and learning, to be, quite literally, “beacons on the hill.”

That is not the environment in which public universities exist today. In fact, they are enmeshed in the problems of society in ways that were never contemplated historically. They are expected not only to prepare the next generation to become productive citizens, but are also expected to apply their vast knowledge and resources to solving the problems of society. It is not an exaggeration to say that the mission of the modern public university is to apply the wisdom of the ages and the wisdom of the moment to the problems of our time.

A useful analogy is to think of a university-based public service organization as a bridge between the academic resources of the university and the problems and needs of the sponsoring society. This bridge needs to be strong at both ends. Strength at the university end is achieved through strong faculty and significant contributions to the university mission and expectations, especially in teaching and scholarship. Strength at the societal end is achieved through sound and sustained linkages with practitioners and organizations that represent and carry out the will of the people. The hallmark of a strong outreach program is responsiveness to client/customer needs and desires. Faculty who are committed to building and maintaining this bridge have a hard job, because they are often considered suspect by their colleagues at the university and are often perceived as too academic by the practitioners. Most people choose one life or the other, so that those trying to serve both run the risk of ostracism in both worlds. Thus it takes a rare breed of person to be effective and contented in such work. The

rewards are great, however, for those who like to see the results of their efforts: one can often see his or her impact on the world in a very direct and meaningful way.

But how can this bridge be built? There are two dimensions to the answer: one deals with organizational leadership, the other with individual career choices.

There are many different ways that universities can be and have been organized to carry out their tripartite mission, so that what should be emphasized about any organizational model is that it is of secondary importance. The true strength of an institution lies in the competence, integrity, imagination, enthusiasm, and commitment to the overall institutional mission of the faculty and staff. In fact, the best organizational model is probably the one that creates a positive working environment for creative and productive faculty and staff and then gets out of the way!

The University of Georgia has had a unique organizational arrangement in that one of its three chief vice-presidents has been the Vice-President for Public Service and Outreach (formerly the Vice-President for Services). This has been extremely important to the success of the service and outreach program in Georgia, because it has meant that the person primarily responsible for the outreach mission has been at the table for all major decisions on strategic planning, budget development and implementation, and overall institutional direction.

In addition, since 1975 the University of Georgia has had a separate cadre of "public service faculty," with a separate career ladder and reward system. The major benefit of this approach is that all of the faculty who are brought in under the service umbrella know what their priorities are. They are not evaluated on purely academic standards, but rather on a wider set of criteria, including program and project development and coordination, instructional materials development, program evaluation, policy and other applied research, and professional assistance in consultation and technical assistance. In many ways this system has been very successful. By most objective measurements, the University of Georgia has one of the most comprehensive and far-reaching service programs in the country.

Nevertheless, the system has given rise to a sense of second-class citizenship on the part of many of the public service faculty, who do not carry professorial ranks or titles and who are not even eligible for tenure consideration (the proverbial gold ring of the academic community). This is not likely to change, given the criticism of tenure generally, but it has had a chilling effect on the recruitment to the Vinson Institute of highly qualified academics with a strong practitioner orientation. What would be worth considering by the academy at large would be a reward system that is more holistic in nature, one that applies a broader set of evaluative criteria than have been used historically, incorporating into the criteria the kind of measurements that are used for the public service career ladder. The understanding of teaching and research would then be broadened to encompass the more practically oriented among us.

### ***The Struggle for Balance***

An overriding challenge for a unit such as the Vinson Institute of Government is to maintain the proper balance among the principal modes of public service, namely, instruction/continuing education, research, and technical assistance; and to maintain a

proper balance among the various groups that it serves, namely, the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of state government; local governments, including counties, cities and school districts; and citizens in general to upgrade their knowledge about the structure and processes of democratic institutions. Achieving the proper balance is not easy. In fact, it is a never-ending process, and one that must take into account not only the needs of the organization, but also the strengths and needs of the individual faculty members as well. Table 1, "One Model of a Teaching-Research-Service Matrix," shows one approach to articulating balance among roles.

Table 1

*The Carl Vinson Institute of Government: One Model of a Teaching/ Research/Service Matrix*

<u>Clients/Customers</u> (Percentages are examples only.)	Core Technologies		
	<u>Teaching</u>	<u>Research</u>	<u>Technical Assistance</u>
State	16	8	6
Legislative	5	5	2
Executive	10	2	3
Judicial	1	1	1
Local	20	13	17
Citizen/Teacher	4	3	3
International	2	1	2
University Students and Faculty	2	1	2
Total %	44	26	30
<u>Products/ Services/ Outcomes</u>	Annual and special training programs	Legislative and state commission studies	City/county consolidation/ cooperation studies
	Certification Programs	Handbooks and manuals	Personnel studies
	Educational seminars and workshops	Policy papers	New GIS systems
	Academic courses	Monographs	New management policies and procedures

The horizontal axis addresses the issue of what our business is. It is up to the organization as a whole to decide what balance it wishes to strike among the respective principal modes of service delivery (or "core technologies," as they are referred to in the table), namely instruction, research, and technical assistance/consulting. (The figures used in the table are a fair approximation of the balance that has been struck by the Vinson Institute of Government.) In an ideal world, each individual faculty member in the institution would work out a balance that best fit his or her strengths and interests, but everyone would be expected to devote at least a portion of time to each of

the three areas (for work program enrichment, if for nothing else). A person who was a gifted teacher/trainer, for example, might have a 80-10-10 division of labor, another 75-10-15. Or a gifted researcher/writer might have a split of 25-50-25 or 20-70-10. And so on and so on. The challenge for the organization, of course, would be to ensure that the overall organizational goals were met, once all individual preferences were taken into account. Certainly this would require some juggling and refinement on a case by case basis, but it should be the overall goal or strategy.

The vertical axis addresses the issue of who our client/customer is. Once again, the organization must decide what balance it wants to strike among competing service users (e.g., state legislators, local government officials, teachers, students in the academic program), and apportion faculty responsibilities accordingly. Once again, in that ideal world, the preferences of faculty vis-à-vis clients or customers would be honored. The table also reflects a close approximation of the recent allocation of responsibilities in the Vinson Institute.

Ergo, organizational synergy is achieved when its collective energies bring about the desired balance, on both axes, for both the organization as a whole and for individual faculty members.

### ***Faculty Involvement***

An ongoing challenge for the academy at large is encouraging university public service and outreach activities on the part of faculty generally. How can this be done?

First, of course, it is obvious that not every faculty member in an institution should be out on the hustings. (In fact, we all know some who should not be!). But the institution as a matter of philosophy and policy must make it clear that meeting the needs of the community is as high a priority as studying and explaining the nature of things. And the reward system must reflect this understanding: in evaluating the individual work program in each of the three principal areas of activity (instruction, research, and technical assistance/consulting), the criteria must be broad enough to encompass the wide range of approaches to instruction, research, and service being utilized. Feedback from the client or customer is critical in this process. Otherwise, one is measuring merely input, not results and impact.

Another foundational issue in university public service and outreach is attitude, which can be a problem for many university faculty, partly because of their expertise. Most of them aren't used to listening; they are used to "telling." They are professors, and they like to "profess." They are experts in their respective fields, and they are anxious to tell it like it is, by God! This can be an obstacle in dealing with clients or customers, who are generally not interested in lectures, but in being heard. Therefore, there is a need for some "attitude adjustment" for many faculty before they jump into public service and outreach.

Another part of the attitude problem for some is a disdain or distaste for the practical. Practicality skews their findings, blurs their assumptions, upsets their theories! This is not a realistic view of life. One does not always have the luxury of being outside looking in, but must occasionally jump into the fray.

The public is not always open to working with faculty because of their own prejudices. The ivory tower is the commonly used term reflecting the perception of univer-

sities and professors widely held by the general public, who see them as being removed from reality, “standoffish,” arrogant, “too academic.” This is another barrier that must be broken down before a faculty member can be effective. And the best person to break down this barrier is the faculty member himself or herself, by being ready to listen and ready to help, by being there. Nothing brings down interpersonal barriers faster than sitting shoulder to shoulder, trying to work out a solution to a problem, which, of course, presupposes mutual respect.

To be effective, a faculty member must take on at least the illusion of humility. Kipling’s wise counsel about walking with kings but keeping the common touch is an apt guide for university faculty members. They may have great expertise in a particular subject, but without a good relationship with the client and the ability to communicate their ideas effectively, it will all be for naught. The Apostle Paul might have put it this way: I may speak in tongues of many lands and possess great knowledge on many subjects; I may give my body to be scourged by committees; I may volunteer to do the annual report; but if I cannot communicate my ideas to the person I am talking to, I am but a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal!

To reiterate, the Vinson Institute is an integral partner in the educational enterprise of the university. The institute’s placement at the juncture of the academy and Georgia communities provides a special opportunity to apply both teaching and research skills in a broader context, a broader classroom, as its faculty take the instruction and research capabilities of the university out into the state where they can be brought to bear on the needs and problems of Georgians. Articulating the different roles of the faculty, using an approach such as that in Table 1, is helpful to sustaining and rewarding faculty work while also ensuring that institutional, individual, and community objectives are met.

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