

2011 SCUPSO Conference: Session Highlights

The Future of Public Service

Charlotte, NC

April 7, 2011

Discussion Leaders:

Mary Jinks, Institute for Public Service, University of Tennessee

Roby Robertson, Institute of Government, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

Mike Smith, School of Government, UNC-Chapel Hill

The 2011 SCUPSO conference culminated in a discussion of the future of public service. The session began with brief remarks from each of the three discussion leaders and evolved into a larger group discussion. Highlights included:

Mary Jinks reported that the Institute for Public Service has been working to diversify its funding base. One quarter of our budget is in grants and contracts, she noted. We have a lot of customers and demand for a wide variety of services, she went on, explaining that they supplement staff expertise with other faculty and consultants.

In terms of the future, we're trying to shift towards more strategic thinking, Mary commented, noting that they're trying to look towards what their customers are going to need five to ten years down the road. We're also trying to be more proactive, she said, bringing our customers to where they *need* to be, even though they may not yet have recognized that need. We're also recognizing that we may no longer be able to respond to every request. In the past, we've tried to respond to everything ourselves – we're now trying to look more at drawing on expertise from external sources for some of these requests.

Roby Robertson encouraged everyone to think carefully about their strengths and mission. Think about your elevator speech, he urged the group. How are things changing? He said he's seeing more community engagement and more sophisticated data systems from a range of public service institutes, as well as more linkages between the academic side (education) and in-service training.

Looking towards the future, Roby commented "who we are is diverse. Who we're going to be is probably even more diverse." One possibility might be more adjunct faculty, he suggested. Another scenario might be the institute serving as the hub of increasingly networked/collaborative structures bringing together public and private actors. We need to be at the forefront in increasing awareness among the public sector about networks and how government needs to be much more of a hybrid, he emphasized. He concluded by posing what he said was the "ultimate" question: should we stay in a university?

We are also trying to be more strategic, said Mike Smith, but at the same time we've been successful historically with being opportunistic – that is, jumping on opportunities we didn't foresee. I think that the definition of public service is expanding, he said, observing that his institute has become more involved in public-private partnerships and has less of a sole focus on core government services. I don't think we've been as intentional as perhaps we should be about the changing role of government and who our clients are, he observed. Should we be working more with non-profits, for example?

He reflected that when he first became involved in SCUPSO, a lot of the discussion was about how institutes didn't feel valued on their campuses. I think we've all gotten a lot more strategic since that time, he commented. We've been forced to become a lot more entrepreneurial, which is not necessarily a bad thing, he said, noting that he doesn't mind being "the underdog."

Mike went on to talk about the changing role of technology. We need to expand our use of technology to reach people, he noted, but we also need to think more about instructional technology. We're in the information business. How do we get information to people in different ways so when we do get together face-to-face we're starting the conversation at a more advanced place? Picking up on Mary's earlier comment, Mike said that one of his institute's core values has always been to be responsive to everyone. But it can kill you, he said, to the understanding of everyone in the room. One of the things we've been exploring is how we can shift some of this burden online, such as through listservs and other peer exchanges, he explained.

The session concluded with a discussion around a question posed by Bob Becker. Bob began by commenting on the rise of institutions such as the University of Phoenix and the declining market share of traditional universities. He then asked, "How do we distinguish ourselves in an eroding sector?"

In practical terms, Mary noted that every year in February, her institute distributes one-pagers tailored to specific stakeholder groups. This includes one-pagers to every legislator detailing what the institute has done in their particular district.

The question of impact is a huge question for us, Mike emphasized. We've tended to focus more on technical issues in the past. The shift we're thinking about is exploring how we can become more involved in policy issues and how we can help solve policy problems.

The Future of Public Service: Survey Responses

SCUPSO members were invited to share their thoughts on The Future of Public Service to the session's discussion leaders in advance. Comments received are noted below.

1. What changes, if any, do you see in terms of the types of services – or mix of services – you provide in the future?

- Two areas we are discussing are assisting local governments with citizen engagement and sustainability efforts.
- Increased challenge in handling grey areas of "public-private" (e.g., economic development policy and program work); "university-private sector" (RE: contracting for services, thus having a wider mix of full-time, part-time and contract providers, raising more concerns about "competition" with private sector). These both apply to areas such as GIS, IT, facilitation services, and program evaluation.
- More involvement with state agencies
- Continuing need to assure services are relevant to changing customer demands. As energy costs (both on physical plants and fleets) and benefits costs continue to pressure government operating budgets, the need for more assistance in leaning government operations will grow. Similarly, as the public sector workforce ages, the need for HR-related assistance is also likely to grow. Finally, there is a growing demand to help communities manage challenges of changing diversity demographics in our region.
- We're evaluating ability to charge more for services we provide, which may then influence what we do in the future.
- Customized for a particular region and specialized for a particular profession

2. What changes, if any, do you see in how you deliver your services and/or conduct your operations in the future?

- We are investigating delivering traditional classroom training sessions on-line.
- More flexible teams and resources - networks both for distance communication, "virtual teams" for coaching/advising and consulting; need to see about subsidies (traditional grants and others) to reach low wealth communities.
- Better technology to help us deliver more direct field consulting services in the future.
- Need to move more aggressively and capably in providing training and information on the web and in using hand-held technologies to provide assistance and information (smart-phones). Growing segments of our customer base won't continue to accept only traditional modes of service delivery. While we will always need face-to-face relationships to be successful, to be as fast and reliable as needed, we will have to use technology more.
- We're looking at how to use electronic delivery technologies for training and information dissemination.
- Expanding the use of social media platforms and other technology, but can never take the place of personal relationships

3. What unique value do you think your institute/center currently contributes to your university? Do you see this changing in the future?

- We help fulfill what was once the university's public service mission, although currently public service as we know it is not part of the mission. I don't see this changing with the current university administration.
- Nonpartisan, regular, applied scholarship on many key topics for state and local government officials. Direct service to state legislators on a regular and as-needed basis. I see this as increasingly important as the university's public service mission to NC is tested via reduced resources from state appropriations.
- We bring 40 years of tradition.
- Our institute provides the direct link between the university and most of our customers. In addition to our athletics programs, our institute staff are the most visible and vibrant association that most of our customers will ever have with the university. This value will strengthen over time as we get better at focusing our energies and university resources toward the most important problems our customers experience.
- We contribute to the University's engagement mission and don't see this changing in the future.
- Helps achieve the land-grant mission. Is the "face" of the university to many citizens across the state

4. What unique value do you think your institute/center currently contributes to your city, region and/or state? Do you see this changing in the future?

- We believe we improve the governance of local governments across our state through our training, research and technical assistance efforts. We hope to have more of an impact in the future.
- We increase learning capacity to elected officials and coordinate service by other resource agencies.
- We provide reliable, expert, non-partisan, relevant assistance and training to leaders across the state that is tailored to their market segments. This will continue, but the topics and methods of delivery will change.
- We partner with others on projects designed to guide policy, improve operations, and institutionalize best practices. No change foreseen
- Access to a vast array of university-based resources that is hard to navigate without an entry portal. In the future will demand more relevancy and relationship to economic/work force development.

5. Unfortunately, we all know what causes us dread as we look towards the near future. But, what gets you excited about the longer-term future? What do you see as the greatest opportunities for public service organizations?

- This is difficult to answer. We have a tremendous challenge overcoming obstacles on our own campus which threaten our existence.

- Excitement - new forms for interactive, high quality meetings and learning systems "at a distance." More opportunities for PSOs to collaborate on particular policy and program needs - create generic resources, and then customize to the state/region/city level.
- The greatest opportunities are economic development and sustainability issues.
- One of the greatest opportunities is to grow the next generation of public service leaders. The current public sector workforce can have significant turnover as baby boomers reach retirement age, so it's time to re-tool the public workforce! Equally exciting is the opportunity to help re-build public confidence in the public sector's ability to add value to the quality of life for its citizens. With all of the negative publicity toward the public service these days, society must be reminded of the value and benefits provided to our society by public servants, rather than only what public employees are taking from our society. Finally, I believe public service organizations can help solve meaningful, large challenges facing our communities including economic transitions, demographic shifts, and developing more sustainable lifestyles.
- As long as we add value, there will be opportunities to partner with others to improve the well-being of individuals and communities.
- Bringing current private sector practices to work in the public sector, for example "lean government."

6. What do you think public service organizations will look like in the future if they are to successfully meet today's challenges?

- For us, it may be a hybrid organization shared across universities or with other organizations. We don't believe we can sustain our model long-term.
- Greater connection/integration with MBA, social work, policy, government, etc. resources from the same campus (e.g., better strategic and directed student projects that create value and tie in to faculty and student research needs)
- Employees will be more versatile.
- I think public service organizations need to continue working to be more customer-focused and relevant, need to continue working to secure and build appreciation within their institutions, and need to continue working to diversify their funding sources. Improving our abilities to articulate the results of our work and marketing those results will be helpful.
- Not sure; maybe more virtual.
- Successfully partnered with other relevant organizations. Less dependent on public appropriations.