

July 2008

Tidings (A quarterly reflection from the Director of the Institute)

Governance in Conflicted Landscapes of Memory and Action

The Institute is surely at an important point in its organizational development as we celebrate our second anniversary. The energy is palpable, the creativity always energizing and the range of projects underway inspiring. I want to focus on a subset of our efforts here. We have, for some time now, been developing a range of long-term and effective collaborations with entities on our campus and in the communities we serve. Sponsored projects and research are underway in community-and-public health and in child and social welfare as well as in disaster risk mitigation and resilience and peace building, among other initiatives. Much of our work is integrative and transdisciplinary and aims to understand and address the challenges that arise with today's complex forms of governance and to devise effective solutions and strategies. But as we embark on these efforts, it is striking how little is known about how one actually "does" this important work. Accordingly, we are exploring and testing alternate conceptions of transdisciplinarity even as we seek to create such efforts.

Our project in Sub-Saharan Africa with the Virginia Bioinformatics Institute (VBI) is illustrative. This collaboration aims to join VTIPG expertise with VBI capacities to develop a long-term presence and partnership in two Sub-Saharan African nations to assist in combating infectious disease. But even as we seek ways and means by which to encourage planners, geographers, political scientists, biologists, computer scientists and mathematicians to work together, we are also self-consciously developing mechanisms to chart the whys and wherefores and relative efficacy of what we are doing. The result is always fascinating, sometimes painful and finally, we hope, a significant contribution to this critically important area of inquiry and action.

Our interest in complex forms of governance and intersectoral relationships also extends to our projects and research linked to social welfare. Few policy domains in the United States are more complex or more conflicted than this one and few are more vital. Our project teams, led by Mary Beth Dunkenberger and Renee Loeffler, not only are making these complicated service delivery structures work more effectively at the local and state levels, they also are seeking ways to deepen our understanding of how they work (or not) and what may be done in the longer pull to make them more effective and equitable instruments of policy action. In so doing, they are exploring in practice a key example of the complicated mosaic that is service delivery and governance in the United States today.

The Institute's work in peacebuilding provides another example of an effort that self-consciously crosses disciplinary boundaries and creates new common ground. Professor Laura Zanotti of our Department of Political Science and I are engaged in creating a long-term research and project agenda linked to the roles of community-based organizations and philanthropies in peacebuilding. Our work took us to Belfast, Northern Ireland in late May. While there, we were privileged to participate in a superb conference on Victim Empowerment sponsored by the Foundations for Peace Network whose leaders also kindly allowed us to interview them for our research. Developing

peacebuilding strategies and understanding the social, political and cultural dynamics that underpin them demands deep sensitivity to the ways in which the various stakeholders are making sense of their world(s). The differences among parties in conflict may be deep, wide and enduring, but peace and effective governance demand action notwithstanding.

Taken as a whole, the work briefly described here is at once daunting and humbling and symbolizes the Institute's commitment to ethically informed, intellectually vital and policy relevant understanding and action. We can and should aspire to no less. Those we serve certainly deserve our best efforts.

We are always interested in hearing from those with interest in our work. Please feel free to contact us at cbm9q@vt.edu to share your ideas and perceptions. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Max Stephenson Jr.
Director