Washington and the Ivory Tower:

How Government Can Engage Academe in the Service of U.S. Middle East Policy

by Martin Kramer **(/experts/martin-kramer)**

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Brief Analysis

On November 24, 2009, Martin Kramer and Mark Clark addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss how government can engage academe in the service of U.S. Middle East policy. Martin Kramer is The Washington Institute's Wexler-Fromer senior fellow and president-designate of Shalem College in Jerusalem. Mark Clark is director of the National Security Studies program at California State University--San Bernardino and president of the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Martin Kramer

Today more than ever, academia and government need to reengage with each other. Academia possesses huge assets of knowledge that can be useful to government, but because of the inward focus of academia, these assets have generally been shielded from government. If government engages academia correctly, however, not only can government benefit from academia's assets but, from the academic perspective, government itself will become an asset.

The climate has changed in part because of the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the recent election of Barack Obama. Academic believers in smart power are now more eager than ever to prove that their theories apply in the real world. Such an opening occurs only once in a generation and, as a result, could shift the broader relationship between government and academe. In order for government to engage academe, it must first understand the principal forces motivating U.S. academics. These forces, to summarize, are peer review, independence, and access to sources. If the government supports academics in each of these areas, then the chasm between academia and government can be bridged.

Peer review is at the core of academic life. Academics know that, ultimately, their career paths will be decided by their peers around the world. As a result, academics are particularly sensitive to the zeitgeist of their disciplines, a reality that pertains acutely to the humanities. In a way, this peer community represents the most entrenched

obstacle to government's engagement with academe. At the very least, peer reviewers insist on their prerogative to scrutinize every program or relationship to see if it conceals elements that endanger academic freedom, elements that are seen to emanate principally from Washington. In addition, many in the academic community frown on the temptations associated with cooperating with government.

Government has ways of circumventing academic forces that oppose cooperation, however. In some cases, government officials have promoted relationships with academics on an individual basis, usually away from campus. This, of course, represents a very low-grade form of engagement, when the larger objective should be to influence research agendas. Such attempts to influence broader agendas, not surprisingly, can be viewed as especially intrusive and controversial by academics. Yet channels still exist for government to push for scholarly research in support of its interests. Government backing of think tanks and quasi-governmental institutions like the United States Institute for Peace and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars helps encourage scholarship -- and broader research agendas -- in tune with government needs. But additional steps need to be taken. In order for the government to be more successful in engaging academics, it must encourage and nurture large peer groups connecting the two sectors. Such a development could have substantial benefits, with one effect being that government partnerships would no longer be perceived as unusual but rather as a commonplace and sought-after end.

The myth within academia is that it alone can regulate itself -- that the academic community will reliably speak the truth. Perpetuating such a faulty belief are processes associated with tenure and financial endowments, which bolster individual academics' personal security. Sacrosanct though tenure may be, it can exempt researchers from being continuously accountable for the work they produce. Government cannot provide security and status that compete with tenure, but it can create alternative enticements such as funding for multiyear endowments, which inevitably will lead to a more favorable view of government by academics across the country. In addition, the creation of "centers of excellence" gives government limitless funding resources that can lead to viable and instant networks that will earn respect within the academic community.

Access to information has always been the strength of academia, and academics have continued to push the notion that optimal research materials are most accessible when academics are free of government affiliations. In support of such a view, proponents point to places where suspicion of the U.S. government runs high, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran or Palestinian refugee camps. In such locations, they argue, affiliation with the U.S. government can be seen as an impairment to researchers' ability to collect unbiased data. Furthermore, some argue that within certain disciplines, association with government is endangering accessibility for their colleagues and hence anyone who works with government should be censured accordingly by the academic community.

The U.S. government can counter its critics through a number of means, including the sheer amount of information it collects and stores. Government access to open-source materials, difficult-to-reach places and people, and classified information represents a treasure trove for researchers. Fashioning initiatives and programs that provide academic partners with firsthand access to such databases and resources is at the forefront of the challenge for government. By opening the lid of its "treasure chest," government can have a real impact in a competitive academic setting in which special material is viewed as a research advantage.

In certain foreign governments, control of access to resources results in distorted research agendas and their associated findings. For years, research "radicals" in the United States have claimed that cooperating with the government has a corrupting effect. Yet the case can be made that access to authoritarian and police-state governments has a much greater potential to corrupt. All access comes with a cost, and the cost of associating with the United States is negligible. The more broadly this truth is embraced by academics, the easier it will be for them to work with government both openly and without apology -- to the shared benefit of both sectors.

Mark Clark

In the 2004 National Intelligence Reform Act, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) was given the initiative to reach out to academic institutions. The next year, the ODNI announced a series of grants related to national intelligence in an effort to attract scholars from institutions of higher learning. In the past four years, the effort has gone from attracting four universities to encompassing a web of schools across the nation, including a consortium of seven universities from the California State University (CSU) system. As it continues to grow, the ODNI grant program recently accepted another seven universities to host Intelligence Community Centers of Academic Excellence. We may view the ODNI grant with the CSU system as a potential model for future government programs promoting partnerships with academia.

The program at California State University--San Bernadino (CSUSB), the main campus at which the CSU Intelligence Community Centers of Academic Excellence are being conducted, differs from conventional scholarly partnerships. The main evidence of this is that the focus at CSUSB is not on scholarly research but rather on recruiting both students and military veterans to train for jobs in the intelligence community. The CSUSB program has four principal goals. The first and primary goal is to develop curriculums that encourage students to pursue careers in the intelligence community. The second goal involves the hosting of annual colloquiums and speaker series, at which individuals from a broad range of intelligence agencies can present their views and assessments of current events. These speaker series serve as a parallel learning tool with the curriculums and encourage in-depth discussions and analyses. The colloquiums also provide a venue in which students can present their own findings to the intelligence community, relying on open-source material alone. Finally, leaders at the CSU Intelligence Community Centers of Academic Excellence hope to recruit high school students and encourage opportunities to travel abroad. These two last goals -- to offer a forum for students to present their findings and to recruit high school students -- are, although crucial for the viability of the program, secondary and may change depending on its trajectory and funding.

Programs like the CSU Intelligence Community Centers of Academic Excellence have advantages beside the obvious focus on training students interested in working in the intelligence community. One less overt advantage involves the cooperation it promotes between government and academic institutions, which ultimately may help narrow the gap between the two sectors. Through this process, intelligence agencies also may learn to embrace methods used by academic institutions, while coming to understand the administrative and scholarly challenges many academics face. On the other hand, academic institutions like those belonging to the CSU system are learning how government bureaucracy works and coming to trust it more easily. Greater harmony will likely result from such collaborations, with government tapping the skills and knowledge of academics, and academics, in turn, gaining access to valuable information. Through the CSU Intelligence Community Centers of Academic Excellence program, the objections of naysayers in academia and elsewhere have thus been diffused.

Although the current ODNI grant will eventually expire, the program may be continued in an alternative form. In a more general sense, such programs can be built upon and possibly used as a model for a national strategy. Rather than having a plethora of agencies fund their own academic initiatives and programs, trimming the bureaucracy to promote a common research agenda can be the next step in our efforts to bridge the gap between academe and government.

This rapporteur's summary was written by Kayvan Chinichian. ❖

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