



# STENNIS SPOTLIGHT

*The latest updates on SIG, policy, and politics*

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# 2020 Annual Report

SPRING 2021

## John C. Stennis Institute of Government & Community Development

## 2020 ANNUAL REPORT



COVID-19 dramatically changed the way we go about our daily lives all of our communities. Through this global pandemic, we have remained vigilant in our efforts to provide the premier research, service, and training that people across the state of Mississippi and the nation have come to expect in our over 45 years of operations.

2020 saw our output increase, our reach expand to other states, and our staffing to remain at its strongest. The incredible faculty, staff, and students worked tirelessly to convert our trainings to a hybrid format, providing opportunities for individuals to learn while remaining safe and secure in their own environment when necessary.

As we move into the new year, we will continue to offer both in-person and virtual trainings, service, and applied research to all who request our services, and will do so with the same professionalism and unbiased, non-partisan approach as we have throughout our existence.

Our 2020 Annual Report notes just a few highlights from the work accomplished last year.

# Meet SIG Executive Director, Dr. Dallas Breen

By Breana Norton

Joseph Breen, PhD., has many titles, from Executive Director at the John C. Stennis Institute of Government, to Assistant Research Professor in the Political Science Department, to President of multiple organizations across Mississippi and the United States. To everyone in the SIG office, he goes by Dallas. Breen's dedication to his work and the Stennis Institute of Government is evident in the way he devotes his time and efforts to see out the staff and student's work.

He constantly encourages employees and students to finish the work they started, and he provides any resources necessary to the project. The Stennis Institute's long-serving previous director, Marty Wiseman, PhD., recruited Breen to originally establish a new polling center and work to redistrict communities. This developed into overseeing the day-to-day operations of the Stennis Institute, though Breen comments that "day-to-day" looks different every day.



One day a mayor or supervisor could call, the next, anyone from campus, could stop by. The next day, a congressman could drop in to discuss a new research proposal. Another day, he could find himself in numerous meetings. Breen is going on 11 years at the Institute. He is currently focusing on a COVID-19 online instruction survey, which investigates the success (or lack thereof) of online learning from the perspective of school faculty and administration. Other ongoing projects include a biennial municipal salary survey, mapping the 2020 elections at the precinct level, and numerous grant proposals.

Breen oversees the Stennis-Montgomery Association, a bipartisan student organization. His most rewarding experiences come from guiding students and helping them find their direction in life, whether that be in Mississippi, Washington D.C., or anywhere in between. Even on Mississippi State's campus, he finds joy in mentoring graduate students. Outside of working with students, he assists newly elected officials in understanding their roles and responsibilities in their new position; assisting the people of Mississippi remains his greatest pleasure. In his free time away from public service, Breen can be found at any Mississippi State athletic event or coaching his son's baseball, football, and basketball teams. On a slow weekend, he enjoys experimenting on the grill.

Don't let his life behind the white office door in the Institute fool you – he was a wide receiver and cornerback in his prime. He also played midfield on the Mississippi State Lacrosse Team. From undergraduate to PhD, Breen is a Mississippi State University Alumnus through and through. Breen resides in Starkville with his wife, Lacey, and their son, Cayden Joseph. They have two dogs, a black lab named Manny and a toy miniature dachshund named Tootsie.





## Meet SIG Student Worker & SMA President, Reagan Conner

By Marlee Melcher

Reagan Conner is an Undergraduate Research Assistant with the Stennis Institute of Government (SIG) from Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. She is a junior Biochemistry major with a concentration in Forensic Science and a minor in Political Science, as well as the President of the Stennis Montgomery Association (SMA) on campus. Conner has been with the Stennis Institute of Government since the fall semester of 2018. Conner was on the fence between majoring in Biochemistry and Political science and followed in her brother's footsteps to apply for a student position at SIG.

Conner was interested in the type of research SIG conducts. In the office, you can find the junior helping with data entry or organizing events or opportunities with SMA. Currently, Connor is working with other research assistants on a project involving women in government. Her favorite part about working here is the friendly, relaxed environment.

Conner is considering pursuing an advanced degree in Tropical Medicine or Disaster Management after finishing her undergraduate degree, she has broad goals set to get into the field after graduation.

When Conner is not at SIG, working on assignments, or working at her other job on campus, you can find her earning her Firefighter Certification. Conner is a volunteer firefighter and is working two to three nights a week earning her certification. With school, two jobs, and earning her firefighter certification, Conner's free time is basically nonexistent. To say Conner is a busy and successful student would be an understatement!





# Stennis Montgomery Association

By Reagan Conner

The Stennis-Montgomery Association, also known as SMA, is a student-led organization on the Mississippi State Campus that is affiliated with the John C. Stennis Institute of Government. The Stennis-Montgomery Association is a non-partisan, student organization heavily involved on the Mississippi State Campus. The purpose of the organization is to provide opportunities for students to learn more about the role of politics in Mississippi. Ultimately, the Stennis-Montgomery Association will allow Mississippi State University's influence in the arena of political decision-making to become as prominent as the other great successes of the "People's University."

The Stennis-Montgomery Association (SMA) allows students of all backgrounds and academic disciplines to become active on the political scene. The mission of SMA is to educate students on the importance of government, help students gain insight into potential career pathways in related fields, and provide students with networking opportunities that could open doors to help them in their journey toward success. All members of SMA have the opportunity to hear from guest speakers, meet like-minded peers, receive updates on relevant internship opportunities, and participate in voter registration drives. Additionally, each year the most dedicated members of the organization visit Washington D.C., to meet and network with MSU alumni and other prominent political figures.

Students that wish to attend the trip to Washington D.C. must demonstrate dedication to the organization in a few ways. In order to be considered, a student must have attended most meetings and events, volunteered in other ways in the community, attended the day trip to the Mississippi state capitol, and written a short research paper on either Senator Stennis or Congressman Montgomery. The trip to the Mississippi state capitol gives students their first glimpse at the political realm. The group has the opportunity to ask questions and hear from many state legislators, officers, Mississippi State alumni, and other relevant speakers. As for the research paper, students are selected based on the quality of their research and writing. The student with the best paper on Senator Stennis and the student with the best paper on Congressman Montgomery are also each awarded with a \$1000.00 cash prize.

Those that are selected to attend the trip to Washington D.C. travel as a group during spring break. The organization partners with the John C. Stennis Institute of Government to help cover the cost of the trips for the students that are selected to attend to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to participate. Once in D.C., students will see the sights of the city, meet our Mississippi Congressmen and Senators, sit in on panels with MSU alumni and others that work on the Hill or in other areas of D.C.. This personalized experience helps many students determine if a career in D.C. or in politics is truly the right fit for them.



# CUPSO 2021 Conference

By Gracie Kelley

The Consortium of University Public Service Organizations, (CUPSO) is an association that seeks to support and collaborate with university-based organizations across the country. CUPSO and their partners go above and beyond to better serve their communities. Members research trends and government patterns to improve policy making, provide efficient management practices, and build effective leaderships skills to local and regional governments. CUPSO also offers students an opportunity to engage in public service outlets.

The John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Community Development (SIG) at Mississippi State University is one of the many university organizations that is dedicated to CUPSO's mission. In order to better serve our fine state and skillfully communicate with its residents, SIG partners with CUPSO because it provides the tools needed to work with municipalities in community development projects. Annual conferences are held so that CUPSO members across the country can connect and learn from each other. The conference allows members to hear the perspectives of other dedicated public service workers. Several SIG employees attended the conference this year, including Matthew Peterson, PhD, John Harper, PhD, and Heston Lollar. First time attendee, Peterson, notes the benefits of attending the conference.

"I appreciated that the conference gave a chance to discuss the type of work that my colleagues are doing and how their research benefits their local governments," Peterson said. Clearly, this conference has paved a way for professional relationships and community partnerships to take flight.

## CUPSO

### CONSORTIUM OF UNIVERSITY PUBLIC SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

During this year's conference, participants adapted to a new online format due to the obstacles that COVID-19 has presented. For many, it was a brand-new experience. This is because for some, it was the first time that they were able to attend, while for others, it was so different due to the virtual approach that it felt like a new conference in whole. Despite the challenges and changes, the conference was still beneficial and informative. According to Lollar, SIG's Communications and Outreach Coordinator, "Taking the virtual approach could potentially be a permanent adjustment to the conference." This way, members who may not be able to travel for the conference can still tune in and be a part of the breakout sessions.

"The virtual presentation allowed for participants to attend all of the breakout sessions whereas at an in-person conference, participants would have to select which sessions to attend because of time conflicts," John Harper, Postdoctoral Research Associate, added. These sessions pinpoint specific issues and provide the skills and steps necessary to benefit the local communities. The breakout session entitled "The Changing Media Landscape" was a big hit among several of our faculty here at SIG, even those whose expertise is not communications and outreach. This session informed participants of the rapidly changing media landscape as well as how to stay up to speed with the constant changes. In order to be an efficient public service worker, it is necessary to keep up with how the media is adapting.

While this session was beneficial for a diverse group of individuals across various areas of expertise, there were many sessions geared more toward work that SIG does year to year. Sessions such as "Becoming a More Effective Facilitator", "Workforce Development", and "Podcasts" were among the most helpful to SIG staff. Many of our employees took the opportunity to attend so that they can be better equipped when diligently working on their upcoming projects for SIG. Overall, members thoroughly enjoyed the conference this year and gained plenty of skills to take with them as they work toward a better future at SIG, as well as a better future for the state of Mississippi.

# Recent Publications

## Strategic Doing: Developing Strategy to Address Complex Challenges

By Jeremy Murdock & Joe Fratesi



Why are so many leaders and citizens frustrated with the lack of action and the inability to solve challenges in their communities or organizations? Why are so many plans gathering dust on a shelf rather than being implemented? The reason is simple. Many of the challenges that organizations, communities, and regions face are rooted in a complex set of issues that no single person, entity, or organizations are in charge of addressing.

These complex challenges, and the environment in which groups attempt to address them, is changing rapidly. The world is moving faster and is more connected than ever, and our old models for developing and executing strategy are quickly becoming antiquated.

Strategic Doing is an exciting new approach that helps local communities, regions, and organizations form the collaborations needed to address complex challenges. The key to this approach is that it helps build action-oriented collaborations quickly in order to address challenges that no single entity or organization can address on its own.

Strategic Doing provides a framework to help various groups identify their assets; develop strategies to link and leverage those assets into new opportunities; and build trust between the groups by identifying initiatives that they can begin to implement immediately. The Strategic Doing process focuses on quickly identifying ways to take action rather than producing more long-range plans that gather dust on a shelf.

The Stennis Institute has utilized the Strategic Doing approach with numerous groups from across the Southeast and Midwest. These groups have included economic development agencies, municipal governments, chambers of commerce, higher education institutions, existing committees, and volunteer groups among others. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Stennis Institute has successfully modified the process to adapt to a virtual format. Recently two different groups have utilized the process to develop agile strategy in order to address complex challenges they were facing.

A task force had recently been formed at Mississippi State University to explore opportunities around health sciences. The Stennis Institute worked with the Health Science Task Force at Mississippi State University to imagine a health science academic ecosystem where partners from across campus and beyond build on existing research and a history of outreach and service to collaboratively equip and prepare students to contribute to and lead health-centered efforts and enterprises. The Strategic Doing process allowed the group to identify nearly 200 health science-related assets at Mississippi State University; develop 30 potential opportunities for capitalizing on those assets; and nearly 50 potential short-term projects that could be implemented immediately and serve as catalysts for developing this new academic ecosystem.

The Stennis Institute was also enlisted by the Mississippi Development Authority to work with an action team of volunteers in the West Jackson Neighborhood to address complex challenges within their neighborhood. The Strategic Doing process was used to identify neighborhood assets and link and leverage those assets to find opportunities for making the West Jackson Neighborhood a thriving neighborhood where every resident could realize their full potential. Through multiple virtual sessions the team identified 20 different potential opportunities that could help improve the neighborhood and 15 potential short-term projects that could immediately be implemented by the volunteers and serve as catalysts for positive change within the neighborhood. Is your organization struggling to address a complex challenge? Contact the Stennis Institute to discuss the Strategic Doing process and see if it could help you move forward.

# Strategic Planning and Management in Small Municipalities in Mississippi

Published in the *Public Organization Review* by Springer in January 2021, this article explores the adoption and use of strategic planning and management by communities and local governments in Mississippi. SIG Executive Director, Dr. Dallas Breen, co-authored this article with three colleagues.

[Read the full article here!](#)



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