

Reflections from a Korbel Practitioner in Residence

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Mixing it up with the Korbel School's stellar cadre of researchers for a week as a practitioner-in-residence reaffirmed for me the value, and real importance, of focused interaction between the scholarly, policy and practitioner communities. My home base is Washington, D.C. where I work on advancing alternatives to violence and locally driven democratic development at the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Atlantic Council. Before that I was at the U.S. State Department, deeply ensconced in the Afghan and Syrian conflicts from the field. The Sié Center's new collaborative research project on "nonviolent strategies in violent contexts", generously funded by the Carnegie Corporation, addresses many of the questions that I confronted practically on the ground.

One great advantage of the Korbel School is that it is not in Washington. Scholars here who do policy-relevant research are not as heavily influenced by "Beltway belief". By that I mean bold statements and policy recommendations that are sometimes (often?) not backed by much empirical evidence. Researchers here feel safe to test the conventional wisdom on topics ranging from countering violent extremism (CVE) to engaging corporations in peace-building via rigorous quantitative and qualitative analyses. They aren't afraid to publish what the data says. Korbel scholars are highly skilled in multi-method approaches to answering tough questions. At the same time, Sié Center director Deborah Avant has ensured that the institutional DNA here to make the research readable and relevant to policymakers and practitioners.

At the University of Denver (DU) I met with Sié fellows and PhD students, post-docs, faculty and the dean to swap thoughts about authoritarian resilience, the link between bad governance and protracted violence, and about how to measure the effectiveness of external support to nonviolent resistance movements. The latter topic is the focus of my new book project with Erica Chenoweth, Korbel stalwart with whom I co-authored *Why Civil Resistance Works*. Erica, her colleagues and I hashed out some data-collection and research design issues associated with the book project, then came up with a structured questionnaire for interviewing policymakers. Dean Chris Hill joined us in a public discussion with the larger DU community about why authoritarianism is making a comeback and what practically can be done about it. That was great.

Then we did something even niftier. A core group of Korbels pre- and post-docs rallied around a computer screen to Skype with the founder and director of *Rhize*, an NGO that supports local nonviolent campaigns and movements around the world with training, coaching, and connections to international allies. *Rhize* is currently grappling with questions about how to adapt their operations to effectively support fast-moving campaigns, and how to evaluate the impact of their engagements. Enter a group of researchers who are trained in methodologies of monitoring and evaluation and the design of pilots and you have a useful conversation. Helping organizations that help nonviolent activists, I believe, is one very practical way to support nonviolent actors in violent contexts.

Those who have worked in government know that responding to immediate crises and drafting memos with quick turn-around times are normal activities. It is a luxury to be able to think, strategize, evaluate, and draft policy recommendations that are bolstered by empirical evidence and informed by insights from other cases and conflicts. Meanwhile, scholars and researchers who operate in a complete policy vacuum are not going to have much impact beyond the Academy. The Korbels team understands this and has developed various tools, including practitioners-in-residence and rapid response funds for travel, to foster timely interactions with policymakers and practitioners. Ideally this would happen more frequently to bridge the policy-academic divide.

I benefited greatly from the week in Denver and recommend the experience to practitioner colleagues who want to test their assumptions about policy issues, glean lessons from comparative cases, and inform research projects that can ultimately help them do their work better. The Rocky Mountain air, furthermore, is famous for inspiring fresh thinking and refreshing the soul. I will continue to collaborate with the Korbels crew on policy-relevant research and am grateful to have smart sounding boards from beyond the confines of D.C.