

Influencers



ACADEMIA

A Deep Dive Into Government

By MIKE MAGNER

The academic world has no shortage of “centers” studying government and looking for ways to make it better.

George Mason University’s David Rehr, a former lobbyist now teaching advocacy and leadership at GMU’s Schar School of Policy and Government, has plans for a new one with grand ambitions: figuring out how to apply business principles to government programs to make them more effective and efficient.

But in this case, the goal is to

start small when the Center for Business Civic Engagement is up and running later this fall, Rehr says.

“Everyone you ask hates the DMV,” he says, recalling a recent visit to the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles to get a title for a vehicle he was selling. “I sit there at least an hour and 40 minutes for what ended up being a two-minute transaction. And I’m looking around and I see lots of people sitting and waiting. ... Isn’t there a better way to do this?”

So one of the first projects of

the new center will be a close look at the DMV to determine whether some simple business practices could be applied to improve operations. Rehr says he’s already found examples in states like Nevada, where the DMV set up self-service kiosks in shopping malls for residents to make transactions.

Rehr also plans to reach out to business people across Virginia for suggestions on how to improve government. A report on promising ideas would then be emailed to every elected official in the state — from town council

members to U.S. senators.

Ultimately, though, Rehr sees the center digging deep into the data available at government agencies nationwide and making it more accessible for anyone seeking information on exactly how tax dollars are being spent.

“I think we’re at a unique time,” he says. “Trust in government is kind of declining. ... For some, they don’t perceive things are being done. And yet they’re spending as much or more on government, and they’re like, ‘Where’s all the money going?’”

“So I came up with this idea of

having more transparency. With Google we can find out anything we want. But if you look at a lot of the government financial data it's hard to figure out what it means."

Rehr envisions his new center's website having links to government databases where "you could just keep driving down until you could see all of the transactions. ... I want to be able to see cash-flow." And using that information, he says, agencies could be pushed to "do things that are smarter, that a business person would have to do."

The idea of tapping into the business world for ideas goes back to Rehr's early days as a lobbyist for the National Federation of Independent Business.

Rehr, 59, grew up in the Chicago suburbs, went to St. John's University in Minnesota, worked on the 1982 campaign of Republican Vin Weber and followed the new congressman to Washington, which led to the job at the NFIB. From there he went to the National Beer Wholesalers Association in 1992 and led the organization for 13 years.

During that time, Rehr con-

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nected with Rep. Tom DeLay, a Texas Republican who became majority whip after the GOP won control of the House in 1994. (Rehr says he was the first to call DeLay "The Hammer," a nickname that stuck because of his renowned arm-twisting skills.) DeLay recruited Rehr to help run "The K Street Project," a push to get more Republicans into a lobbying industry long dominated by Democrats.

"We felt like Democrats had been so long in power that we needed to make sure people making decisions on PAC money and strategy had more of a Republican tilt," Rehr says. As a result, he says, "I think there was more of an infusion of Re-

publican thinking in decision-making."

In 2005, Rehr became president and CEO at the National Association of Broadcasters, where he led a \$1.2 billion marketing campaign that transformed the television industry from analog to digital. Five years later, after earning a Ph.D. in economics at George Mason, he became a professor in the Graduate School of Political Management at George Washington University. He became director of a GWU program on advocacy in July 2014 and took a post at George Mason's Antonin Scalia Law School in January 2016. This summer he moved to the Schar School, where he pitched the idea for the Center for Business Civic Engagement.

The Schar School's dean, Mark J. Rozell, was easily persuaded. "The intersection of business and politics is a key and largely understudied area of analysis," Rozell said in a statement for CQ. "We intend to help fill an important gap in the public's understanding of the role that business plays in engaging

the community in civic-oriented political discussions and in making positive contributions to policy development."

Rehr already has a foundation for the center in work he's done since 2011 on a personal project called TransparaGov Inc., which he describes as "a software/technology company with the mission of bringing transparency and accountability to governance."

He is now seeking private donations for the new center at GMU with the goal of raising \$300,000, and expects to launch the center's website within the next two months.

The core of the mission statement is "to study the impact of the application of business theory and principles to government," Rehr says.

"I used to sit in meetings as a lobbyist and it was always 'Who benefits from this and what is the politics?' And the question should be, 'How can we measure the performance and is it the right way to spend the money? And if it was my money would I spend it that way?'" ■

IN BRIEF

■ **Nicole L'Esperance**, communications director for Oregon Democratic Rep. Earl Blumenauer since March 2015, has moved across the Capitol to join the press team in the office of Sen. Ron Wyden, another Oregon Democrat. **Sean Ryan**, who has been a press assistant in Blumenauer's office since June, takes over as his communications director.



■ **Abigale Tardif** is joining the White House staff as an associate director of research

for presidential appointments and scheduling. She has been an aide to Republicans on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee since February 2017.

■ **Charles Park** has moved to the Department of Energy as an attorney adviser after three years on the staff of the House Natural Resources Indian Affairs Subcommittee, most recently as deputy chief counsel to Rep. Doug LaMalfa, a California Republican.



■ **Ethan Abner**, an aide to Florida Republican Rep. Tom Rooney

since 2016, is now special assistant to the assistant secretary of Defense for legislative affairs.

■ **Kirsten Hartman**, formerly a communications director for Minnesota Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar, has moved to the National Restaurant Association to become media relations director. Hartman had been with Klobuchar since May 2017 and previously worked for three House Democrats: Peter Welch of Vermont, Henry Cuellar of Texas and former Rep. Bruce Braley of Iowa. Klobuchar's new communications director is **Jonathan Beeton**, formerly with the Office



of Public Health and Science at the Department of Health and Human Services and before that an aide to Florida Democratic Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz.

■ **David Ditch**, a budget analyst for Senate Budget Chairman Michael B. Enzi, a Wyoming Republican, since May 2015, has moved to the Heritage Foundation as a research assistant.



■ **Brent Bombach**, an aide to Ohio Republican Sen. Rob Portman since 2011, has joined NEC Corp. of America as government relations director.