

“The Mind and Soul of the University: Celebrating the Lives of  
Elinor and Vincent Ostrom”

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie  
President  
Indiana University

Celebration of the Lives of Elinor and Vincent Ostrom  
IU Auditorium  
Monday, October 15, 2012  
3:00 p.m.

1. THE INDISPENSIBLE MIND AND SOUL OF THE UNIVERSITY

As historian James Axtell writes, “the faculty is the indispensable mind and soul of a university.”<sup>1</sup>

In the pantheon of outstanding scholars who have comprised the “indispensible mind and soul” of Indiana University in recent times, none were more eminent than the two whose lives we celebrate today.

Elinor and Vincent Ostrom truly were two of Indiana University’s greatest treasures. The enormous impact they had as teachers, researchers, advisors, and administrators at Indiana University for nearly five decades is simply beyond calculation.

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<sup>1</sup>James Axtell, *The Making of Princeton University: From Woodrow Wilson to the Present*, (Princeton University Press, 2006), 27.

Jointly and individually, Lin and Vincent made enormous intellectual contributions to the social sciences and to the broad fields of political theory and policy-based interdisciplinary research.

Their work touched many lives, and their passing was an inestimable and tragic loss to the university and to their many friends and colleagues around the world.

## 2. VINCENT OSTROM: A LEADING MODERN THINKER ON GOVERNANCE

Vincent, who was the Arthur F. Bentley Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Indiana University, has been called “one of America’s greatest modern thinkers on governance and the human condition.”<sup>2</sup>

A fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Vincent joined the IU faculty in 1964. An internationally acclaimed scholar and a highly respected teacher, Vincent had a tremendous influence on the study of institutions and societal governance, and he spread that influence broadly through the work of his students and colleagues. His work encouraged us to think of the public sector as a polycentric system rather than a mono-centric hierarchy.

Peter Boettke, University Professor of Economics and Philosophy at George Mason University, wrote that “nobody has done more than Vincent Ostrom in understanding the burdens of the democratic way of life and the political structures consistent with that way of life.”<sup>3</sup>

In 2005, the American Political Science Association bestowed the John Gaus Award upon Vincent for his lifetime of exemplary scholarship in the joint tradition of political

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<sup>2</sup> Filippo Sabetti, Barbara Allen, Mark Sproule-Jones (eds.) *The Practice of Constitutional Development: Vincent Ostrom's Quest to Understand Human Affairs*, (Lexington Books, 2009)

<sup>3</sup> Peter Boettke, in cover blurb for Barbara Allen (ed.) *The Quest to Understand Human Affairs: Essays on Collective, Constitutional, and Epistemic Choice*, Volume 2, (Lexington Books, 2012).

science and public administration. As the award committee noted, even after his official retirement from the IU faculty in 1990, Vincent remained amazingly productive, producing “work many would deem appropriate to define a career.”

His work, of course, also laid the foundation for Lin’s work, work that would ultimately earn her the Nobel Prize in Economics.

### 3. ELINOR OSTROM: NOBEL LAUREATE AND PIONEERING SCHOLAR

Elinor earned her master’s and doctoral degree—both in political science, and both at UCLA—at a time when there was widespread resistance to admitting women to doctoral programs. But, as we know, Lin would be a pioneer in many ways during her long and distinguished career.

She began at IU as a visiting assistant professor in government. She often joked that she was only hired because the university couldn’t find anyone else to teach American Government at 7:30 a.m. on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

Lin’s extraordinary talents were soon evident, and she was offered a tenure-track position on the faculty. She would go on to rise to the rank of Distinguished Professor and to become the Arthur F. Bentley Professor of Political Science at Indiana University.

Even before she received the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, she became known throughout the world as a leading social scientist, and as a gifted, incisive, and creative scholar.

Her landmark book, *Governing the Commons*, dispelled the conventional wisdom that common property is universally poorly managed and should, therefore, be either

regulated by central authorities or privatized. Lin's work in this area was largely responsible for the extraordinary growth of the academic study of the commons.

But her work was also part of a much larger research project, which included examining the power of civil society, the development of social norms, and the voluntary collective action of citizens to solve problems.

Her work bridged disciplinary boundaries long before interdisciplinary effort was the norm in academia. She was intensely active in international science networks, particularly in the area of global climate change.

Lin was also a great believer in the power of collaboration. During her prolific career, she had more than 200 co-authors—which is particularly remarkable for a social scientist.

She was a fellow of several of the most prestigious national academies, and she received honorary doctorate degrees from ten universities around the world.

Lin was also the first woman to receive several major awards in the field of political science, including:

- the Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science from the Johan Skytte Foundation at Uppsala University in Sweden,
  - the James Madison Award from the American Political Science Association,
- and
- the William H. Riker Prize in Political Science from the University of Rochester.

And, of course, when she received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009, she became the first woman to receive the prize, and, to this day, she is the only female Nobel Laureate in Economics.

All of us at Indiana University took great pride in each and every contribution to scholarship made by Lin and Vincent, but, of course, the Nobel Prize represented the height of distinction. The award brought great honor to all of Indiana University, its faculty, and students.

#### 4. AN EXTRAORDINARY TEAM

Together, Lin and Vincent comprised an extraordinary scholarly team. Vincent was the biggest supporter of Lin's work, while Lin was quick to credit Vincent for much of her own success.

Of course, in 1973, Lin and Vincent co-founded the renowned Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, which we renamed in their honor this spring. For nearly 40 years, the workshop has served as a model for collaborative, interdisciplinary scholarship that brings scholars together from around the world to answer some of the world's most vexing questions: questions related to water resources, peace-building, environmental pollution, democracy, and governance.

Lin and Vincent also exhibited extraordinary generosity to Indiana University. Time and again, when they received a major award, they donated the financial component of the award to the university. Lin and Vincent's gifts to IU, which included Lin's Nobel Prize funds, totaled in excess of \$3 million. They did this, not to bring any glory to themselves, but so that the work in which they so strongly believed could continue and so that future generations of talented students would have opportunities to pursue their educations at Indiana University.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Lin and Vincent were visionary scholars, wonderful colleagues, dear friends to many of us, and an inspiration to us all. We were incredibly fortunate to have had the benefit of their presence at Indiana University, and with their passing, we lost two irreplaceable and magnificent treasures.

In the introduction to TIME magazine's 2012 list of The 100 Most Influential People in the World—a list that included Elinor Ostrom, TIME's editors observed that “the nature of influence changes. ...Before microphones and television were invented, a leader had to stand in front of a crowd and bellow. Now she can tweet a phrase that reaches millions in a flash. Influence was never easier—or more ephemeral.”

For that reason, TIME's editors note that they try to choose those people “whose influence is both lasting and laudable.”

Elinor and Vincent Ostrom surely rank among the very few people in the world whose influence can truly be said to be both lasting and laudable.

Their influence, of course, will continue to shape the future of the Ostrom Workshop for many years to come, but it will also continue to shape future of institutional analysis, the study and practice of self-governance, and the work of social scientists, physical scientists, and policymakers around the world for many decades.

On behalf of Indiana University, let me say how deeply grateful we are for their extraordinary commitment to collaborative scholarship, their tireless service, their profound generosity, and their “lasting and laudable influence.”