Good morning. It is my honor and great pleasure to welcome you this morning, and to kick-off a full day of stimulating presentations and substantive conversations. I am Sarita Soni, Vice Provost for Research, and, to be perfectly honest with you, I am also very honored to be speaking just before Lin Ostrom’s session on Social-Ecological Systems, and as she ushers in a new era in the life of the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis.

Reviewing the agenda and list of participants, it was extraordinary, but not surprising, to see representatives from practically every corner of the world. This reflects well on the Workshop’s past, present, and its future. I am grateful to all of you for taking the time to travel to Bloomington and to be a part of this important and critical time in the life of the Workshop.

I hope the past few days of listening, deliberation and engagement have been stimulating and forward looking. Each of you and the coming generation of scholars will shape the future of the Workshop and build on its strong foundation laid down over the years by Lin and Vincent Ostrom with support from many of you.

There is indeed so much to say about the Workshop and Lin’s global and stellar reputation as its leader, but I will not elaborate on that this morning since later this evening, you will hear from Provost Karen Hanson and she will do the honors of speaking extensively about Lin’s many contributions to Indiana University and beyond. Using this conference as one tool for evaluation, I am very pleased that while Lin Ostrom and her team work through the upcoming review of the Workshop, Lin will assume the role of Senior Research Director at the Workshop ensuring its mission well into the future. On behalf of my office, and Indiana University, I want to thank Lin for assuming this role and to say how pleased I am that her presence will continue for years to come.

Since the Workshop was established by Lin and Vincent Ostrom in 1973, the Workshop has reported to IU’s Office of Research which is enormously proud to have supported this unique research center during its nearly four decades of existence. Throughout those years, the Workshop has continuously enriched the intellectual environment of IU, creating an unparalleled reputation that has, in turn, strengthened the reputation of the university.

In a 2002 interview with IU’s Research & Creative Activity magazine, Lin Ostrom said of the Workshop, “We simply study institutions, that’s what we do.” While the Workshop’s focus may be singular—the study of institutions—the work they do is hardly simple.

In this bicentennial year of Charles Darwin’s birth, the Workshop’s unique approach to the study of human behavior may be likened to the way Charles Darwin altered our views of biological species.
Darwin’s focus on the principles and patterns underlying the development and descent of species revolutionized biological approaches of his era. So too has the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis revolutionized the study of institutions and changed the nature of social scientific inquiry.

The focus of the Workshop is nothing less than the foundations of human civilization and society – the ways in which humans make decisions, manage resources, and govern themselves. Under Lin and Vincent Ostrom’s guidance, the Workshop has become internationally recognized as a source of knowledge, based on empirical studies, theoretical deliberations, and a deep awareness of how the dynamics of political institutions affect the choices that humans make.

Fifteen years ago, when I was special assistant for research and the editor of Research & Creative Activity magazine, I had the pleasure of recognizing the Workshop’s 20th anniversary in an issue of Research & Creative Activity magazine. At the time, I noted the Workshop’s remarkable record in providing a home for scholars and students to critically examine ideas, evaluate their scientific merits, perform experiments, and disseminate their results for the benefit of many.

This intricate relationship of theory to empirical research has become the Workshop’s signature “brand” of analysis. Through its unwavering commitment to uniting theory with empirical observations in order to challenge conventional wisdom, develop new models, and solve real-world problems, the Workshop has produced many groundbreaking analyses of human group behaviors.

Those models and analyses can help a new president of a developing country increase the strength of democratic institutions, or help communities decide how to better use limited resources, or direct development dollars to the places they will be best used to improve people’s lives.

Because of their work, the Workshop has become a magnet of intellectual activity, facilitating the interaction of social science scholars from around the world, people like yourselves, who come to Bloomington to share their fascination with the ways in which order arises in human society, how that order evolves into complex institutional patterns, and why those patterns either succeed or fail.

My earlier mention of Darwin brings to mind ‘evolution,’ and the Workshop has done its share of evolving over the decades.

After notable success with its early studies into police operations during the 1970s, the Workshop began to shift from comprehensive data collection toward sophisticated sociopolitical inquiry aimed at identifying rule systems and how they operate across different political and cultural contexts.

As the Workshop evolved and matured in new directions, it is noteworthy how its core values and principles remained at the forefront:

First, the Workshop model of analysis has never shied away from theory and complexity. The leaders and scholars of the Workshop have long recognized that human problems in this world are enormously complex, necessitating multifaceted approaches and solutions.
Second, the Workshop has emphasized the value of student involvement from its very earliest studies of police operations, which were begun as a student initiative. The student engagement in the long-running series of police studies established a pattern of scholar-student interaction that continues at the Workshop to this day.

Finally, the Workshop initiated collaborative interdisciplinary models of investigation long before multidisciplinary teams started to form in the academic world. In its audacious disregard for traditional boundaries of disciplines, the Workshop was at the absolute forefront of conducting research in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary groups.

Together, these groups have repeatedly leveraged the most fruitful ideas from political science, economics, sociology, environmental science, and many other fields to ask and answer BIG questions regarding institutions and how they affect human behavior.

Decades ago, the Ostrom’s had a visionary understanding of the strong potential made possible through international networking and broad comparative analysis, and they set about remaking the Workshop into an intellectual meeting ground. Put simply, Lin and Vincent Ostrom have long held to a fundamental belief in the creative potential of individuals, whether scholars or citizens, who are willing to work together to solve problems. It is this belief in collective effort that underlies all of the Workshop’s projects to this day.

With the upcoming change in Lin Ostrom’s role, the time has come again for the Workshop to evolve. From the very beginning, the Workshop has been unusual, even unique, among university research centers, and I expect this distinctiveness will continue into the future.

I have no doubt that the Workshop’s future will be worked out in precisely the collaborative and pragmatic ways its scholars and students have used to assess so many pressing questions.

Over the decades, Vincent and Lin Ostrom have created a remarkably high standard – the Workshop has grown to include an active publications program of its own, a research library, a digital library, ongoing partnerships with universities in China, Mali, Thailand, and elsewhere, and involvement in an international network of forest management research centers. Without question, however the Workshop proceeds, it must continue to live up to the remarkable contributions of Lin and Vincent Ostrom.

In an editorial for the Research & Creative Activity issue that celebrated the Workshop’s first 20 years, Vincent and Elinor Ostrom wrote this:

“How people think of themselves, structure their relationships with others, and pursue opportunities, may make the difference between a sustainable and meaningful way of life and a way of life reduced to rubble. … Problem-solving requires a sense of mutual regard for each other and a willingness to draw upon what people can learn from one another in building common knowledge and shared communities of understanding.

They go onto say….”
“What we have learned from our experience at the Workshop is that the work as it unfolds can be immensely stimulating and productive. Each achievement is the beginning of new adventures.”

“Each achievement is the beginning of new adventures.” There could hardly be better advice for the future of the Workshop than that.

Thank you, and have a productive day -- I know Lin would not have it any other way.