The Role of Professional Associations in Strengthening the Professionalization of Public Administration

By: Donald E. Klingner
Professor and Coordinator of Public Administration
Florida International University
Miami, Florida USA
Klingner@fiu.edu

Professional associations are key to strengthening public administration, both in the United States and other countries. This presentation will focus on the following issues:
1. Why does global connectedness increase the need for professional public administration?
2. How does lifelong learning enhance professionalism?
3. How can professional associations encourage lifelong learning?
4. Mexico as an example

1. Global Connectedness and the Need for Professional Public Administration

Global connectedness implies informed intervention in other countries to enhance development. The challenge is how to improve praxis -- the practical application that links theory and practice. The need here is for a deliberate, proactive effort to use research to enhance theory, to identify best practices, and to create laboratories for improving professional practice (Rice, 1992). And it is here that the practical effects of the imperfect conceptualization of comparative administration are most pronounced (Brinkerhof, 1996; Kettl, 1997; Corkery, 1998; and Welch, 1998). These are things we simply cannot do well if we do not understand what is happening in other countries. In Mark Huddleston’s (1999) memorable phrase, we must learn anatomy before performing surgery.

2. How Does Lifelong Learning Enhance Professionalism?

For practitioners this may mean greater tendencies to contract for, fund, or otherwise support research activities that seek to better explain the prevailing paradigms that govern practice or to analyze practice so as to produce generalizable or non-generalizable explanations for the success or failure of certain managerial approaches (Peters, 1988; and Kettl, 1997). The academic community might enhance opportunities for professors to take sabbaticals or participate in exchange programs with other institutions in other countries to gain a better insight into the influence of culture and politics on management. It might also engage in cooperative research with governmental agencies, sister institutions in another country, and professional organizations. These organizations could create a mentoring system whereby senior administrators actively involved in providing technical and managerial assistance to other countries, might link with an apprentice college with special talents but limited experience in order to cultivate new generations of globally oriented researchers and scholars.

If public administration expects to be truly globally connected it must become increasingly aware of and adept in employing new technologies that affect and influence efficient and compassionate public management. With the advent of the Internet, high definition television, and increasingly complicated integrated network systems, it is imperative that public administrators be committed to staying abreast of technological development and the residual demands of these technologies on supervisors and employees. This awareness also heightens the need to find ways to influence public policy decisions that not only encourage this type of knowledge acquisition but also foster creative research in this area by public administrators and the more technically predisposed.
3. How Do Professional Associations Encourage Lifelong Learning?

Professional Associations encourage lifelong learning by public administration professionals. First, they offer training courses, like ICMA University, on a regularly scheduled basis for their members. While these do not receive university credit (as would more formal courses of study at universities or institutes), they provide the opportunity for attendees to learn current theory and practice, and to discuss issues with their colleagues.

Second, they offer annual training conferences that allow members to work cooperatively with each other, to learn research results, and to apply them in their respective professional settings. These are usually supplemented by local or regional conferences that perform the same function at a local level. Most importantly, these conferences offer informal opportunities for practitioners in the same geographic area or functional specialty to “network” with each other. Why “reinvent the wheel” when you can learn from others who have successfully (or unsuccessfully) confronted the same issues, under similar conditions, as you are now facing?

Third, professional associations often offer other services to individual organizational members. These may include publications, technical assistance, newsletters, legal updates, and other information of interest to practitioners.

They can also take a stronger advocacy role to obtain public and private resources to sustain research and technical assistance that will develop practitioners, teachers, and researchers who understand globalness (Klingner, 1999). This includes ASPA, APPAM, NASPAA, NAPA, ICMA, and IPMA.

Finally, of increasing importance in the Internet era is their ability to make information, publications and internal communications available to members through their listservs and Internet sites. These are particularly of interest to international members because they eliminate the need for postage, and increase free access to teaching and learning materials which would otherwise be beyond the reach of many international members, or impractical to access. This includes electronic journals and newsletters.

4. Mexico as an Example.

The current experiences of professional associations (inside and outside of the country) in support of Mexican public administration presents a good example of these opportunities.

First, Mexico has a well-developed network of national public administration centers and professional associations that are supported by government funding and member participation. These include the national INAP (Instituto Nacional de Administración Pública), and its various affiliations within each state (including IAPEM, the Institute for Public Administration in the State of Mexico, the large and populous state surrounding the Federal District).

Second, professional associations outside the United States can support these activities by showcasing Mexican public administration in their conferences, programs, and journals. For example:

- A conference panel at the recent IPMA (International Personnel Management Association) conference in San Francisco (October 16-19, 2000) discussed the upcoming implementation of Mexico City’s first career service system for public employees.
- For the past two years, ASPA (the American Society for Public Administration) has sponsored a Mexico Pilot Project, a strategic initiative aimed at improving the effectiveness of democratic governance by positively influencing public policy and management and the ethical performance of public services by (1) supporting knowledge and skill development in managing for results, (2) providing access to best practices in public and non-profit management, and (3) advance the literature of the field. As a result, a network has been formed of over 150 public administration professionals in the U.S. and Mexico interested in these objectives. There were two panels of Mexican public administrators at the 1999 ASPA Convention in Orlando and 3 panels related to Mexican-US issues in the 2000 conference in San Diego.
• CLAD (Congreso Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo) has held its last two conferences in developing countries (Mexico and the Dominican Republic), focusing on the key role of public administration in democratic institution-building. CLAD’s co-sponsorship of this conference with local professional associations (such as UNAM and IAPEM in Mexico in 1999) has helped immeasurably to increase the visibility and reputation of public administration in these countries.

• IPMA (International Personnel Management Association) recently sponsored a conference in San Jose, Costa Rica on challenges and triumphs for human resource management at the beginning of the third millennium. Over 400 people attended this conference from 21 countries, including Mexico.

In sum, professional associations are one way that practitioners and academics can increase the quality of public administration through lifelong learning in the field. This includes training conferences, publications, web-based information and other member services. Informally, they increase communication and reduce “stove-piping” (narrow specialization and vertical rather than horizontal focus) among public administrators. In many respects, their role in improving the process of public administration is as important as their role in improving its context and content.

References


DR. DONALD E. KLINGNER

Profesor Catedrático de la Facultad de Política y Gerencia de la Florida International University en Miami. Especialista en la profesionalización de los recursos humanos, la administración pública y la de personal público en países latinoamericanos y del Caribe.

Ha publicado 10 libros, más que 50 artículos y capítulos en libros, y 25 reportes profesionales. Su libro de texto (Public Personnel Management, 5a ed. en preparación para publicarse) se publicó en el inglés por Prentice Hall por primera vez en 1980 y por McGraw Hill Interamericana (Ciudad de México) como La Administración de Personal Público (2000).


Ph.D. en Administración Pública de la University of Southern California (1974).

Florida International University
College of Urban and Public Affairs, Public Administration Program
Biscayne Bay Campus, 3000 NE 151st Street
North Miami, Florida 33181-3600
Tel.: 305/919-5768 Fax: 305/919-5848
Correo Electrónico: klingner@fiu.edu Página web: www.fiu.edu/~klingner