The Global Public Service: Taking on the Challenges of the 21st Century

Daniel L. Smith
Assistant Professor of Public Budgeting & Financial Management
Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service
New York University
daniel.smith@nyu.edu
212.998.7443 (voice)

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Introduction

This paper’s first goal is to evaluate the evolution and state of scholarship in public administration. It begins with a question: How far have public administration theory and research advanced since 1940, when the self-aware study of public administration, as a field if not a discipline, took root in the United States? We certainly have moved beyond some foundational controversies. Scholars and practitioners have resolved, for example, that American public administration does not reflect Woodrow Wilson’s (1887) norm of a politics-administration dichotomy.1 More important than settling old disputes, this paper argues, is that scholars of public administration in the U.S. and abroad continuously advance the scientific rigor of research and are cognizant of the real-world challenges faced by policymakers and public servants of all sorts. Nonetheless, it is further argued, there remains room for improving our scientific understanding of the public service in the twenty-first century. Turning to practice, the second section identifies how we might better link our scientific findings to the lessons we provide in the classroom. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion on preparing the public service of the twenty-first century and beyond to manage some of the considerable challenges it will encounter.

The State of the Field: Scholarship

Assessing the budding academic field of public administration, Robert Dahl (1947) posed three problems to be solved before it would achieve status as a science “analogous to the natural sciences” (1). They are: 1) Reconciling the field’s attendant democratic norms with the impartial scientific method; 2) Improving upon our understanding of human nature in administrative settings (11); and 3) Building “a body of comparative studies from which it may be possible to discover principles and generalities that transcend national boundaries and peculiar historical experiences” (11). Scholarship in public administration is evaluated by these criteria.2 In the traditional Minnowbrook spirit, this paper gives special attention to the field’s progress toward solving the first problem.

On clarifying the role of normative values in public administration, there has been much progress in legitimating their place in the field. Dwight Waldo (1948, 1952), the field’s first prominent champion of this cause, sharply criticized what he considered parochial, shortsighted, and incomplete theoretical development in American public administration prior to World War II (WWII). This period, now widely referred to as the period of orthodoxy, was one in which the singular framework for establishing a science of administration was constructed upon faith in discoverable management principles, subscription to one of the varieties of the politics-administration dichotomy, and the adoption of operating efficiency as the primary instrumental goal or value of government.3 In particular, he brought normative values to the fore by attacking the efficiency criterion as incongruent with our inherently inefficient democratic process. The critique added significant gravity to Dahl’s (1947) concern that a science of administration built entirely around the instrumental goal of efficiency would not suffice. Scholars and practitioners needed, they argued, an improved notion of what public administrators ought to be doing, and why, in a democratic society.4
In 1968, Waldo organized the original conference of young scholars of public administration at Syracuse University’s Minnowbrook conference site. The conference gave rise to the New Public Administration (New PA) movement, which brought to bear a sweeping and explicit argument for integrating normative values into research and practice in the field. In search of relevance in the face of social upheaval and what was widely interpreted as a declining public service in the United States, New PA scholars condemned the shortcomings of logical positivism and empiricism (Schick 1975). In particular, under the themes of “relevance, values, equity, and change” (162), they argued for much more attention to social equity, wider participation in the political process, and idealism in public administration. The principal champion of New PA, H. George Frederickson, gave particular attention to the significance of pursuing social equity in society as a substantive goal. Nonetheless, he made clear the importance of maintaining the scientific nature of the field in describing the new public administrator as “…less ‘generic’ and more ‘public’ than his forbear, less ‘descriptive’ and more ‘prescriptive,’ less ‘institution oriented’ and more ‘client-impact oriented,’ less ‘neutral’ and more ‘normative,’ and, it is hoped, no less scientific” (1971, 316).

The faculty of the public administration department at Virginia Polytechnic Institute convened their own meeting of academics in Blacksburg, Virginia in 1982. The product of the Blacksburg Conference, a widely disseminated paper known as The Blacksburg Manifesto, was later expanded and developed into a book-length manuscript titled, Refounding Public Administration. The Blacksburgers identified their treatise as “an institutionally grounded Minnowbrook perspective” (Wamsley 1990, 21). More postmodern and institutionally oriented than New PA scholars, the Blacksburgers vigorously defended the legitimacy of “The Public Administration” and its active role in preserving social equity and facilitating civic participation. Their “agency perspective,” the heart of the original Manifesto, is that bureaucratic agencies—the primary repositories of institutional knowledge and skill in governance—ought to serve as the points from which The Public Administration engages in civil society. Under this perspective, bureaucratic agencies are guided by society’s principles in establishing new norms (Wamsley et al. 1990, 36-43).

Explicit work at integrating normative values into public administration, at least on a comprehensive scale, ceased with the refounding period. Nonetheless, newer frameworks for evaluating matters of public policy and management have been infused with normative prescriptions, if only implicitly or even surreptitiously. The first of these in the U.S. was the reinventing government movement. Inspired by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler’s (1993) call for reinvention and Vice President Al Gore’s (1993) mandate to implement this revolution in the federal bureaucracy, the reinventing government movement was founded in the belief that bureaucracy and red tape, as they have been popularly conceived, had stalled innovation and impeded success in government. The solution offered, in short, was to overcome the “bankruptcy of bureaucracy” by encouraging innovation, entrepreneurial management, “customer empowerment,” and a shift “from bureaucratic service to individual empowerment” (Frederickson 1996, 264).

New Public Management (NPM) matured roughly in parallel with reinventing government. Though NPM closely resembles its sister movement, it gives explicit attention to the global and intersectoral nature of problems facing societies; “the movement’s central
problems revolve around government’s relationship with civil society” (Kettl 2005, 6). Indeed, the movement itself sprouted and to some extent still thrives on a global scale. Donald Kettl argues that reform in the vein of privatization or public-private cooperation, or some combination of the two, has spread so quickly and widely that “no self-respecting central government can be seen as not having some sort of reform underway, no matter how modest” (5). The ultimate aim of public management reform, according to Kettl, is to establish a sound system of governance that is “hardwired” with reform (90). By governance, he means a system under which public and private institutions maintain a working relationship between government and society—and collaboratively tackle intersectoral problems (70, 77-78)

B. Guy Peters and Jon Pierre expand on the concept of governance versus that of government (see Peters and Pierre (1998) and Pierre and Peters (2000)). Peters and Pierre (1998) argue that governance entails incorporating the public and nonprofit sectors into all matters of public administration, government influence rather than control, governance by informal, independent networks in which public and private resources are blended, and an emphasis on results rather than inputs (225-227, 230). They draw a substantial distinction between governance and NPM, however, in asserting that governance is a perspective under which the state is central and, as a reflection of the public interest, should take a leading role, while “NPM is essentially a philosophy of generic management” (229). By their estimation, “governance always has been a central element of a democratic polity” and is more process-oriented, while NPM “is more ideologically driven” and “is focused almost exclusively on developing intraorganizational management techniques that ensure customer satisfaction and efficiency” (231-132). Whether contemporary governance entails management by network, and whether traditional government is hollowing out as a result, have been treated as serious research questions in the field, having been subject to analysis by some of public administration’s most distinguished scholars.

In response to Dahl’s (1947) second challenge, our understanding of human nature in administrative settings has vastly improved since the field’s beginnings, sparked by a major behavioral movement in the field that began after the end of WWII. Rejecting the institutional stance taken by traditional public administration, behavioralists were more interested in studying populations than principles. They steadfastly took the stance that empirical work and theory-building by way of rigorous methodologies were more relevant to an understanding of public administration than were descriptive approaches or narrow, practitioner-oriented research agendas. In short, the behavioralists were not interested in atheoretical principles and instead sought to develop and test propositions. The behavioralists’ methodological prowess and empirical stance, coupled with the post-WWII normative attacks cited above and a reorientation by political scientists toward pluralism and inputs in the policy process, left traditional public administration in search of relevance. Nonetheless, the behavioralist movement significantly contributed to our understanding of humans in the public administrative context.

Herbert Simon’s seminal work, Administrative Behavior, originally written in 1945, took an organizational-psychological approach to studying human behavior in administrative settings. Simon (1997) illuminated the idea that “value decisions,” or those related to the selection of final goals, and “fact decisions,” or those related to the implementation of those goals, are interconnected in a more sophisticated way than a simple dichotomy of policy and administration
would lead one to conclude (55-71). Even more enduring is his analysis of rationality in decision-making, which he contended is inextricably constrained by the scarcity of time, material resources, and cognitive ability (72-86). In a later book he co-authored with James March, *Organizations*, reaching a decision under this state of bounded rationality was coined, “satisficing” (March and Simon 1993, 161-162). Simon was awarded The Nobel Prize in Economics in 1978, and his pioneering work on managerial decision-making remains central to theories of human behavior in economics, political science, psychology, and public administration.

Charles Lindblom (1959) adopted the concepts of bounded rationality and satisficing and proposed that policy analysis in public administration is and ought to be incremental. That is, making “successive limited comparisons” among policy alternatives rather than attempting to evaluate all possible alternatives in a comprehensive fashion is how policy analysis is and should be done in the face of legitimate constraints and in the context of a conservative democracy (80-81). A student of Lindblom’s, Aaron Wildavsky (1964), later applied the idea of incrementalism to the public budgetary process. Though Yehezkel Dror (1964) criticized the incrementalist approach as being inertia rather than science, the concept of incrementalism holds a definite and important place in our understanding of human nature in administrative settings. Other examples of behavioral approaches to improving our understanding of human nature in administrative settings include Herbert Kaufman’s *The Forest Ranger* (1960), in which he takes a behavioral-anthropological approach to studying the nature of forest rangers’ work. This seminal piece greatly improved our understanding of diligent administrative action in a highly decentralized setting. Similarly, Michael Lipsky’s (1980) behavioral study of street-level bureaucrats gives us insight into the discretionary behavior of those public administrators who, under significant resource constraints, client pressure, and even fatigue, work diligently to implement policies in a way that fits their local contexts.

Finally, assessing the field’s progress by the final criterion is difficult in comparison. In the first issue of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, James D. Thompson (1956) provides a similar but more precise standard of an administrative science in calling for the systematic investigation of relationships, as opposed to mere description, in the field by way of both inductive and deductive techniques (104). Sparked by the abovementioned movements, scholars of public administration have engaged in a substantial amount of theory building and hypothesis testing in the post-WWII era. Whether they have furthered the pursuit of establishing an administrative science by Dahl’s (1947) criterion, however, is unclear. There do exist coherent bodies of case-based and large-N empirical studies that, grounded in quasi-experimental control, facilitate detailed comparisons between units of analysis. The best developed of these research programs do not necessarily tackle questions that pertain to the whole of public administration, however, nor do they necessarily boast wide generalizability. Nonetheless, we are undoubtedly closer to a state of sophisticated comparative study in the field than were our predecessors in 1947, even if many recent contributions reside in particular subfields and may or may not be generalizable.

Scholarship in the field is vibrant and increasingly sophisticated. For most questions concerning public administration and policy, a wide assortment of quality scholarly articles and books offer insight. Perhaps more important in terms of effecting change in public policy and
management, the literatures found in public administration’s subfields reflect a consistent and conscientious effort by both academics and practitioners to offer scientific perspectives on problems that bear meaning to policymakers and public managers. At the same time, we have not allowed practitioners’ immediate concerns to dictate our research agendas, which would substantially limit the breadth and depth of scholarship in the field. Notwithstanding the field’s remarkable scientific evolution over the past several decades, however, there has been a substantial amount of stovepiping among public administration’s subfields, particularly between public management and public budgeting and financial management. Out of respect for the increasingly complex nature of democratic governance, public management scholars have relied on an impressive array of theoretical perspectives from the social sciences in framing their inquiries, and their empirical methods have followed suit in terms of sophistication. Unfortunately, public financial management concerns have been cut out of this intellectual revolution. For their part, scholars of the public budgeting and financial management subfield have not explicitly joined in on the revolution; they have instead opted for relying heavily on economic theory rooted in questionable assumptions about the behavior of taxpayers, elected officials, and public managers. At the same time, those who study public management have seemingly bifurcated, with one camp committing itself to the tradition of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), and the other primarily aligning with the Public Management Research Association (PMRA). To the extent that scholarly interaction is an essential ingredient in quality scientific discourse, these developments are cause for concern.

The State of the Field: Training

While we have rightly embraced the important goal of continuously advancing scholarship in public administration, training future public servants remains a paramount concern as nearly all students in the field study solely at the master’s degree level. For more than a half-century, those seeking to command the basic tools of analysis and decision-making required of leaders in the public sector have pursued the Master of Public Administration (MPA). Though the mission of MPA-level training has expanded to embrace students seeking employment in non-profit and for-profit organizations that engage in public and quasi-public service, the MPA remains a terminal, professional degree reflecting the philosophy that public administration is “pragmatic, problem-oriented, [and] sustained by faith in progress, efficiency, democratic government, and what we now call meritocracy” (Mosher 1975, 4). Notwithstanding the MPA’s status as the journeyman degree for public and quasi-public service, however, the dramatic transformations in public administration research and theory witnessed over the past sixty-plus years have revealed a substantial challenge for professors of public administration and policy: connecting our best understanding of today’s public issues with the men and women of what is now a global public service. While all indicators of public and non-profit performance suggest that MPA-trained public servants are highly effective and often more efficient than their private sector counterparts, they require new perspectives if they are to successfully negotiate the changing tides of public policy.

As subject experts who have carefully studied the global evolution of public management, it is incumbent upon us to give adequate instruction time to the very concepts we have identified as being essential in contemporary public administration, including governance versus government, administration by contract, and management by network. If these are the institutional arrangements under which public administration is executed in a world that no
longer recognizes political or sectoral boundaries, we must equip students with the skills that are essential to traversing these unconventional political and managerial terrains. In doing so, not only will they be better prepared to engage in public and quasi-public service, but also our relationship with practitioners will be forged with an appreciation that theory can indeed be a boon for practice, and vice versa, even if their respective contributions are not direct and immediately observable.

Meeting this challenge requires giving greater classroom attention to, among other things, public-private cooperation, contract management, non-governmental management, and international relations and diplomacy. While these elements can be found sprinkled throughout MPA curricula, they generally have not yet received thorough treatment in the field’s most prominent texts. By extension, MPA-level courses, including those in organization theory, public administration and democracy, public budgeting and finance, public personnel administration, research methods and statistics, and various public policy “topic” areas, have not yet matured to the point that these concepts are widely afforded substantial instruction time. While an apparently simple solution would be to divorce courses from standard texts, the inherently pragmatic nature of MPA-level training—and the attendant divide between scholarship and practice—means it is not necessarily feasible or desirable to address these relatively new concepts by supplanting traditional texts with scientific literature.

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Within the new institutional arrangements we have identified, the global public service of the twenty-first century will be called upon to tackle a laundry list of problems that are either new to the public agenda or have grown substantially in significance and scope. In some of these problem areas, MPA curricula are well-equipped to adequately train future public leaders, though some modifications may be in order. In others, we must overhaul our analytical frameworks by reframing enduring questions and addressing new ones.

The U.S. federal government’s Social Security Trust Fund’s long-running surplus will wither into deficit within the next decade. State pensions are underfunded. Private pensions are eroding. Post-retirement health benefits are disappearing. Meanwhile, Americans have not been saving. This multilayered, intersectoral deficit in post-retirement income and benefits will pose a serious threat to a generation of retired Americans who by all accounts live longer but are less physically and fiscally healthy than those past. In parallel, younger American workers—those who support the retired—find healthcare increasingly unaffordable as the costs associated with insurance, medical technology, and administration grow at a pace that far outstrips core inflation and, by extension, wages. Thankfully, this story is not merely a cautionary tale that defies intervention by prudent policymakers and skilled public managers.

Whether our solutions to these problems are based in the free market or in government mandates, or a combination of both, public and quasi-public servants at all levels of government, in non-profit organizations, and in for-profit consultancies and firms will have a definite role in shaping and implementing the programs put forth as solutions by policymakers. To equip those educated in MPA programs for this challenge, we must ensure they are sufficiently trained in the economics and management of risk and insurance, with particular attention paid to the areas of social insurance, health policy, and healthcare management. Courses in economics and topical
policy seminars, many of which already address these issues, are widely available in MPA programs. Given their gravity, however, it is worth considering whether more instruction time, or even new courses, ought to be devoted to the economics and management of risk and insurance.

Also worthy of consideration is whether current MPA curricula adequately prepare the future public servant to effectively engage in environmental policy, which will pervade virtually every other arena in the twenty-first century. In particular, global climate change has reframed environmental policy debates as people have slowly come to a stark realization: The earth will exist for several billion more years, but if not for addressing climate change, humans will not. Put simply, global climate change has elevated the challenges posed to analysts and managers to a never-before-seen level. Because many MPA programs offer excellent coursework in environmental economics, policy, and management, with a few taking an impressive leading role in this area, it certainly may be the case that only marginal change is needed. It is critical, however, to foster in MPA students a sophisticated understanding of environmental policy and management, and the reason is simple: The environmental programs they will design and manage include such complex proposals as: 1) cap-and-trade carbon emissions schemes, 2) grants and subsidies in support of discovering and adopting green technologies, and 3) new capital financing methods needed to modernize electricity grids, increase the supply of renewable energy available for consumption, improve mass transit, and substitute gasoline stations with renewable energy filling stations. Put simply, the challenges will be harder, but expectations for excellence in performance will not wane; the men and women implementing these reforms will be required to act quickly, decisively, and intelligently.

On a broader scale, MPA curricula do not give sufficient attention to the fact that tackling complex new problems, including climate change, in a globalized and networked world will require a substantial amount of political acumen. Public and quasi-public servants would be well-served by training in the fundamentals of international relations and foreign diplomacy, even if by way of electives offered in political science and international relations departments. In the least, global public servants in the twenty-first century and beyond will be required to authoritatively but diplomatically carry themselves in foreign environments. In times of major disaster, they will have to act effectively as part of a global network of political leaders, public managers, non-governmental relief organizations, and private corporations. While traditionally trained public servants are certainly capable of taking up this task, they would be just that much more prepared if they were trained to effectively communicate across distant channels in these networks. Given the scope and significance of the problems they will encounter, and the interdependencies built into networks, poor performance entails a substantial multiplier effect.

Finally, an area that cuts across all of those abovementioned but is all but silent in public service training is public relations. There have been several examples of poor public relations in government of late, the consequence of which is a decline in confidence in the public service. Perhaps most notable are the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s public indifference in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the Food and Drug Administration’s failure to keep the public informed of its efforts and findings throughout the Salmonella outbreak of 2008. It is nothing short of a failure that, with few exceptions, MPA programs do not train future public servants in public relations, or media relations in particular, given the high likelihood that at some point they will be called to answer to media. As MPA curricula are tight and do not allow
room for many new courses, a feasible solution would be to require two one-day media relations training sessions, perhaps for course credit. During these sessions, local print and broadcast media professionals would train students to craft public statements, anticipate interview questions, and communicate their message under the pressure of public scrutiny.

As in the case of scholarship in public administration, master’s-level training in the field is in excellent shape. The mere fact that more work is in order if we are to improve training for future generations of public servants certainly is not a sign of weakness. The challenges that lie ahead are substantial, but scholars and practitioners in the field have demonstrated an unwavering capacity to continuously adapt and effectively tackle new problems. Public servants—who traditionally have self-selected into challenging positions—have a long history of solving the unsolvable.
Notes

1 Other versions of the politics-administration dichotomy, such as Goodnow’s (1904), Gaus’s (1931), and Dimock’s (1937), are arguably more sophisticated and more realistic. Nonetheless, the concept was deconstructed after World War II (WWII), particularly by Waldo (1948), Appleby (1949), and Long (1952).

2 This approach is inspired by a doctoral comprehensive examination question written by Larry O’Toole, Golembiewski Professor of Public Administration at The University of Georgia.

3 Instrumental values are “things we desire, not necessarily for their own sake but because they allow us to obtain policies that promote substantive values” (emphasis added) (Weimer and Vining 2005, 153). Wilson (1887) and Dimock (1937) were careful to relegate efficiency to the role of an instrumental value. Gulick (1937) went a step further, however, by arguing that that efficiency is the primary substantive goal of public administration. In this vein, he suggested that the executive organize his activities by the acronym POSDCORB, which stands for planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting (86).

4 Though Waldo’s critique is a very significant installment in the history of public administration research and theory, Bertelli and Lynn (2006) argue that Waldo merely “caricatured” the pre-WWII literature, which was built by experienced public managers whose intentions were to improve public sector performance while preserving the constitutional legitimacy of government administration (16). In summary: “So-called orthodox ideas—‘scientific’ management, separation of politics and administration, neutral competence, unity of command—far from being products of abstract theorizing, were elements of reform agendas intended to empower government to meet the challenges of a growing, industrializing, urbanizing, and diversifying society” (17).

5 Both Osborne and Gaebler’s (1993) book and the National Performance Review, which concluded with the Gore (1993) report, adopted as an assumed premise that traditional bureaucracy, and its attendant red tape, is a malady of which the symptoms are apathy, inefficiency, ineptitude, and ineffectiveness. Kaufman’s (1977) classic work offers a more evenhanded assessment of the uses and abuses of red tape, including its role in protecting procedural justice in public service provision, while Olsen’s (2006) thorough analysis of bureaucracy reveals the true complexity and utility of this much-maligned concept.

6 Some scholars of public administration have criticized the NPM movement for reviving expired concepts and reigniting settled disputes. In particular, NPM can be seen as offering a new but generic version of the politics-administration dichotomy, and it once again establishes the efficiency criterion as the primary instrumental value of government.


8 Further developments in our understanding of human decision-making in administrative settings are challenges to the incrementalist insight. Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) proposed a
“garbage can model” of decision-making in which problems and solutions co-exist in an imaginary garbage can, waiting for those problems and solutions to match up with people and resources so that action can take place. This approach was later adopted and modified by John Kingdon (1984), who presented a “streams” metaphor to explain the policy process as whole; the streams are problems, policy, and politics. Bendor, Moe, and Shotts (2001) roundly challenged the garbage model by identifying errors in the computer program that was used to develop and simulate the garbage can theory.

9 This is the subject of a paper by Justin Marlowe and Daniel L. Smith to be presented at Phase Two of the Minnowbrook III Conference, Lake Placid, NY, September 6, 2008.

References


