

Public Administration at the Intersection of Silent Scholarship and Relevant Research

Concept Paper
50th Anniversary of the Minnowbrook Conference

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The field of public administration.

Generally speaking public administration deals with the functioning, processes, and operations of government, including but not limited to, implementing policy operatives, delivering public services, and managing human resources. The field of public administration has the potential to contribute to the betterment of society by informing the public, impacting policy, shaping governmental processes, and assessing outputs and outcomes. However, as a whole, the field has often fell short—and we are to blame.

Maintaining irrelevancy.

In a time when the administrative state is being questioned and the importance of government being overshadowed, the burgeoning question is how did we get here? It is often easier to point the finger outwards, rather than look inward. However, it is much easier to do away with things that have no apparent value, importance, or need, rather than sacrifice things that are vital, whether perceived or real. It appears that we, the field of public administration, have allowed our importance to go unnoticed, undervalued, and unappreciated. That is on us.

Senator Elizabeth Warren once stated “if you don’t have a seat at the table, you’re probably on the menu.” For far too long we have been on the menu, rather than claiming our seat at the table or, at the very least, creating the table at which we sit. We have been more caught up with trying to establish the legitimacy of the field, and thus we have often neglected to address impending public sector problems via research—becoming irrelevant. We have taken a reactive approach to studying the public sector, studying the public sector as it evolves, rather than proactively shaping its future direction. We, as scholars, have been risk averse, often avoiding innovation. For instance, only recently have we fully embraced behavioral approaches to the field—albeit, this movement is not new. To be proactive and innovative in this field also requires scholars working with public sector employees and organizations to understand problems and needs, design programs, analyze processes, and even report failures.

On becoming relevant.

Relevancy can be characterized as being practical and connected as well as having social applicability and utility. The field of public administration is often discussed as a field rooted in

practice or a design science (Barzelay & Thompson, 2010; Shangraw, Crow, & Overman 1989). Thus, in order to be relevant, it is important for the field to move beyond merely theorizing and having intellectual debates, onwards to that of practicalities, programs, structures, procedures, and so forth.

In Styrlund, Hayes and Deegan's (2014) book, they provide a recipe for relevance that includes: authenticity, mastery, empathy, and action. Let us apply these concepts to the field of public administration. For instance, authenticity not only entails staying true to who we are as a field, but acknowledging the harms done in the field and discussing hard-truths as well. One example is how we often credit the founding of the field to Woodrow Wilson, yet we fail to acknowledge the racial harms done under his tenure in office. It is not to say the latter should minimize the former, but disclosing full-truths are imperative. In regards to mastery, we have put forth the importance of notions like transparency, accountability, responsiveness, engagement, collaboration and so forth, however, there are questions that need further exploration. For example, what does transparency look like in practice? How can governments be responsive in ways that are meaningful for its civilians? Is responsivity cost-effective in light of competing budgetary demands? What accountability mechanisms are most effective and in what contexts? How can we induce empathy and compassion in public servants? These are questions that can be explored using scholarly research.

Addressing silence: The call left unanswered.

The problems present today in many facets of the public sector have been persistent for decades with reform proposals that have long been advocated. For instance, this year, 2018, marks the 50th anniversary of the Kerner Commission, which was originally tasked with studying the racial tensions of the times. In a recent study, findings have shown that not much has changed in terms of poverty, inequality gaps, unemployment, desegregated schools, and a racialized criminal justice system (Harris & Curtis, 2018). A question worth answering is what role has the field of public administration had in maintaining the "The America of Racism" as indicated in the original Kerner Commission? Frederickson (2005) noted the field has long established and discussed the importance of equity, yet actions and outcomes have not matched such discussions.

Systematic and institutionalized issues of diversity (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, gender, ability, age) have been continuously embedded within government and have differentially impacted outcomes. As public administration scholars, we have not devoted adequate attention to asking and answering research questions that touch on or have impacts for systemic inequities and disparities (Rice, 2015). From Flint's water crisis to Ferguson's police misconduct, there have been governmental failures—while devastating in and of themselves—that have had harmful implications for marginalized groups. Yet, this could have been (and still may be) a prime opportunity for scholarship on administrative discretion, decision making, and fiscal constraints. Further, the United States has been (and is projected to continue) experiencing rapid racial and ethnic demographic changes (see Lichter, 2013). However, even with increased diversity, neighborhoods and schools are becoming more segregated by race and socioeconomic status (Tatum, 2017). This may provide an opportunity to investigate the implications of demographic shifts on the public sector workforce and public service outcomes.

Minnowbrook I put forth the call to incorporate equity and participation into the main tenets of the field, apart from merely focusing on economy and efficiency (O'Leary, 2011). Fifty years later, the field is still struggling to answer this call (Gooden, 2015). It is imperative we move from dialogue to action and propel the field towards asking empirical questions that get at the core of inequities in the public sector in hopes to solve longstanding public problems. We can do this by, first, identifying and addressing why we have not made progress and, second, asking questions around the five P's of equity: people, policies, processes, practices, and products. If the original Minnowbrook could be characterized as igniting the consciousness of the field, then it is my sincere hope that we begin igniting the actions and urgency of the field.

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