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## **ASSERTING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION'S RELEVANCE**

Public administration is relevant but we need to participate more thoughtfully to have greater impact.

### *Enough of the insecurities*

Public administration scholars spend a lot of time talking about what we are as a field, what we are not as a field, are we respected as a field, etc. I do believe self-reflection is important but the whole exercise comes off as apologetic and insecure. It is a nearly impossible task for a group of disparate scholars to agree upon anything, including the parameters of the field. I would also add that it is not necessary.

As a group of scholars, we have much to say on a wide range of topics including government institutions, nonprofit organizations, and individuals. If we truly embrace the big tent approach to public administration, we can worry less about setting strict boundaries on what we are and are not. Instead, we can focus on identifying important research questions, and spend more time on getting the word out about excellent published public administration research.

If we start with the assumption that our field, broadly defined, is full of capable scholars, it begs the question of how we can do a better job of making an impact. I offer up three steps, which the field of public administration needs to embrace to reach this goal.

### *Have something to say*

As individuals, we need to have something to say. By this I mean, something important to say. If any of us are writing papers and we cannot explain why the topic is important, we need to back away and find another avenue of research. Of course, we all wind up with papers that we thought were going to be of real importance and they turned out to be inconsequential; this is inevitable. But we need to seriously take a look at what we are spending our time on and consider if the topic is of real importance, or if it is just easy to do or comfortable. We need to help our doctoral students engage with topics that link back to bigger questions, even if they are only chipping away at the margins of those questions.

Obviously, [others](#) have brought up similar points before me. Let me stress though, while I think my area of research is the most interesting, I readily admit that others convincingly make the case that their avenues of inquiry are also important and relevant. What people put their time into studying is of course their choice and driven by their own interests. With that said, as individual scholars it is up to us to explicitly and consistently link our research to important,

timely and relevant issues that address the big picture in order to contribute to a broader body of knowledge.

If we focus more on important questions that have relevance, people outside of our small circle of coauthors will be interested and we will more likely have a direct impact on practice as well as scholarship. The issue is then, how can we identify areas of research that not only interest us and build on our individual strengths, but also are relevant to broader communities?

### *Become a member of a Community of Practice*

I purport that if individuals and groups of scholars have deeper relationships with [communities of practice](#) they will produce relevant avenues of inquiry, have a ready-made audience for their work, and have greater impact. If scholars become a member of policy and administrative communities of practice, then theoretically driven research questions linked to practice will follow. Again, this is not a new [topic](#), but deserves further discussion.

Productive, mutually beneficial relationships with policy and administrative communities take time and effort to build. Academics need to spend time having meaningful experiences with public and nonprofit organizations. Researchers can identify relevant groups and engage with them throughout their career. Joining highly specialized formal and informal groups of practitioners that match up with our individual areas of expertise is the way to do this. For example, in my area of research there are transparency and open government practitioners, both activists and government employees at every level of government. To name just a few, at the international level there is the [Open Government Partnership](#), at the federal level the [American Society of Access Professionals](#) and at the state level the [National Freedom of Information Coalition](#). If we make a long-term commitment to working with, and learning from, these communities of practice, we build trust, and become the experts to which these groups turn.

A complementary model is one where academics take a leave of absence from their faculty appointments and work in a public sector organization. Donor organizations, such as the [Mellon/ACLS Scholars & Society Fellowships](#) or government agencies, such as [Visiting Scholar](#) program at the Congressional Budget Office, support these types of programs. To make this model work, universities must value these appointments and support faculty who want to take them. Scholars need to translate these experiences into research outputs.

Academics can take on short-term consulting project to inform their research. I am not suggesting faculty members focus an inordinate amount of time on consulting, but occasional consulting projects that deepen relationships with communities of practice and build expertise are valuable. Many international organizations actively look for [consultants](#) but university systems do not consistently enable scholars to pursue these activities through course releases or credit for service to the community.

Scholars can serve on government boards, commissions and committees in their areas of expertise. The federal government has a searchable list of [Federal Advisory Committees](#). You can self-nominate for many [state boards, commissions, and authorities](#). These are just a few examples of ways that scholars can work over time to become a member of a community of

practice. The challenge for academic departments is how to recognize this long-term work in the rewards system of universities.

### *Get the word out.*

Universities increasingly want faculty members to get the word out about their research. Faculty members want people to take interest in their work. The issue is then how to make this happen.

Some individual scholars, departments, and journals in our field are excellent at using social media, such as [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Linked-in](#) to do this. The rest of us need help. If done correctly, social media cannot only spread the reach of research to interested scholars inside the field, but also outside our immediate field and to individuals in practice. Some faculty are hesitant to take on social media accounts because they feel it is just another burden placed on already overtaxed faculty members. It is also an open question if, and how, social media activity and [Altmetric scores](#) will factor into tenure and promotion cases.

Other options to extend the reach of our research is to convert our projects into op-eds, pieces for popular presses, or speaking directly with the media. Some outlets such as [The Conversation](#) and The Washington Post's [Monkey Cage](#) are set up to do just this. Unfortunately, as a whole, we have been trained how to do research, not how to write these types of pieces. Arguably as a whole, we are even less prepared to speak directly to reporters. Many scholars are reticent to speak to reporters after having been misquoted once or having a quote taken out of context.

If as a field we want other communities to understand why our research is important for them, we need training on how to present our research in a clear and concise way or have university staff available to do some of this work for us. Academic conferences and universities can provide [media training](#) for faculty members. Again, this raises the same point that these tasks take time and need to be valued in university rewards systems.

### *Moving forward*

Many of the issues I raised are not limited to the field of public administration and none of them are new. If we want to increase the field's relevance, we need to consider what we can do differently and how these outputs are valued in our incentive structures. We need to think about how we can creatively come up with research topics linked to big issues in our times, become active members of communities of practice, and get the word out productively about why our research matters.