

# **Broadening the Perspective for Relevance and Openness**

Minnowbrook 50th Anniversary Conference Concept Paper

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As we celebrate Minnowbrook's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, it appears that the themes of Minnowbrook I, II and III still resonate today. I hope we will have a chance to discuss two important issues, relevance and openness due to their impacting Public Administration, as a field, as well as the perceptions of the field.

## **Relevance**

How do we enhance Public Administration research's relevance to policy and practice? We need to ask how much our work is being communicated, accessed, and made useful for the general public. One particularly relevant anecdote that comes to mind is the search for the missing Malaysian airline. I've used this in my courses as an example of collaboration between organizations; my students have discerned that public management scholars have been studying collaboration, identifying its dynamics, challenges and the benefits. This research could have provided excellent insights on the search for the missing plane. But why did this fruitful body of research, which is central to public management, not make it to the public eye? We definitely could have provided excellent insights and contributed to that long debate about the search which we all closely followed? Yes, and it would have been a meaningful contribution to society grounded in thoughtful research.

Even in the general discussion about policy-making, we need to examine the relevance or impact of our work. How do we, as scholars of Public Administration, find the appropriate space or venue, especially nowadays, to influence policy making (and implementation)? How effective are we in doing that in comparison to colleagues in the fields of political science or economics, for example? Of course, the huge efforts of our associations, such as NAPA and NASPAA, should be applauded here. But we might need to acknowledge that our connections and influence might be more sporadic, at agency-level, or more local in the US. Admittedly, the situation might be different in other countries with the presence of powerful and well-connected national associations<sup>1</sup>.

We also need to take a look at our Public Administration programs. Are we preparing our students for future jobs—and not just for today's jobs? Besides the important topics that we have been studying and publishing on, our educational and training programs—and even research—should consider new challenges that tomorrow's managers would definitely be facing. New—and maybe unfamiliar—challenges are not integral to our curriculum but also are hard to publish in our journals. For example, are we shying away from the topic of ethics due to its complexity,

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<sup>1</sup> Bowornwathana, B. (2010). Minnowbrook IV in 2028: From American Minnowbrook to Global Minnowbrook. *Public Administration Review*, 70, s64-s68.

sensitivity or normative nature? Are we not ready or prepared for and cannot empirically test a topic that is really front and center in the process of decision-making, especially in today's political environment? The same applies to other topics such as privacy and artificial intelligence. I am not referring to the technical aspects but rather the management or administrative perspectives, such as potential changes in decision-making or ethical considerations. Managers of tomorrow would be grappling with these issues; thus, students of today should then be prepared for and educated on. What can we, as educators, do?

One last point regarding relevance relates to today's sentiments. We are Public Administration scholars; we study and teach Public Administration. We believe that government, institutions, systems, and structures are important and necessary for the functioning of society. But now we need to deal with the push back and lack of trust from the public and the negative populist rhetoric raises doubts and questions about what we stand for and believe in. How much is our field going to be relevant if the tides of populism get stronger and higher? Coupled with that, a certain percentage of the public do not believe in the value of higher education for political or ideological reasons<sup>2</sup>; there is an interest in vocational education and training—coupled with relatively higher unemployment rate among people who earn undergraduate degrees in public administration/policy<sup>3</sup>— that could also mean a shrinking body of graduate students whom we can work with to ensure our work remains relevant.

We will continue to talk about the issue of relevance, due to its importance. However, we also need to recognize that we might not be able to reach an agreement. There is a wide variation in the nature or foci of work we do, making such an agreement a hard task. And, as a social science that focuses on administration of public affairs, maybe relevance should be structured or defined in a way that is attainable or achievable but not too ambitious.

### **Openness**

How can our field be more open? I am talking here about open and wide exchange and mutual support.

In general, the roots of the study of Public Administration are in the United States. Consequently, much of the knowledge and theory about the field has generated in the United States, and to a certain extent, Western perspective. Scholars from the Global South are exposed to and have accepted that knowledge but are now digging deeper into their own traditions, practices, and experiences, trying to present their own concepts or non-Western perspectives of Public Administration. So how open are we to that and ready to engage in open exchange and embrace the promises of using public administration theory from a non-Western perspective to inform administrative practice in different societies? We do need to move beyond assumptions of exceptionalism or uniqueness that make it hard to tolerate arguments based on other contexts or traditions<sup>4</sup>. If anything, the political events over the last several years have shown that

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<sup>2</sup> Riotta, C. (2017). Majority of Republicans Say Colleges Are Bad for America (Yes, Really). Newsweek. <https://www.newsweek.com/Republicans-Believe-College-Education-Bad-America-Donald-Trump-Media-Fake-News-634474>

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, G. B. (2018). Undergraduate majors in public administration and competitor fields: How do student characteristics and career outcomes compare? *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 24(2), 173-194.

<sup>4</sup> Bowornwathana, B. (2010). Minnowbrook IV in 2028: From American Minnowbrook to Global Minnowbrook. *Public Administration Review*, 70, s64-s68.

experiences of other countries—that are not necessarily developed or democratic—in managing their public affairs should not be dismissed and can be useful and beneficial to look into. Scholars have developed and championed these arguments and we need to purposively break down some existing barriers to an open exchange, by widening our horizons and also opening our journals to novel perspectives without sacrificing quality and rigor. How different is a case study of a single state in the US from one on a different country? The authors of the latter are often asked to justify, explain, and defend the research’s relevance, importance, and the generalizability to the field of Public Administration. Our field and journals should not be Western-focused.

My last point is that our field is not a large field; yet, we are building more and more silos. It is imperative to build and strengthen relations among scholars who are interested in the same and other related areas. Not all of us need to attend to the big questions of Public Administration. Some of us have the passion for the mezzo or micro-level analyses. Yet, both should not mean being narrowly focused. It is also as important to continue to be different sources, approaches, and methodologies that we are not familiar with or that might generate contradictory or complementary results and arguments to the existing literature being developed in different settings or contexts. As authors and reviewers, we need to push our own boundaries and be more accommodating, without serving as gatekeepers or protectionists and without expecting others to follow our own footsteps.

Is it time to figure out how we can bridge between the different silos or sub-disciplines and how they can find their fit or niche, together, within the field of Public Administration?